

Serving God in the Gospel

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[0 : 00] Eight centuries before the Apostle Paul would write his letter to the church in Rome, the prophet Isaiah wrote to an exiled people of God.

Words of hope, of restoration, of God's coming deliverance, words that echoed through time. It is the Lord who is speaking in Isaiah 52.

Continually all the day my name is despised. Therefore, my people shall know my name.

Therefore, in that day they shall know that it is I who speak. Here am I. Then these famous words from the prophet.

How beautiful. Upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace. Who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, your God reigns.

[1 : 14] Your God reigns. Our text this morning, as we hear from the living God in his word is Romans chapter one, verses eight to 15.

It's a text about a messenger. About one who longs to come to the hills of Rome to bring good news.

To publish peace and salvation. To declare to the people of God in the heart of the Roman Empire under the nose of Caesar. The same message that Isaiah had long ago.

Your God reigns. The messenger, of course, is Paul. He's an apostle.

We met him last week in verse one. An apostle set apart for the gospel of God. The good news God has for us, which ends up being all about God.

[2 : 14] Just as the prophets in the Old Testament spoke on behalf of God, so now do the apostles in the new. Paul's is the good news that was promised beforehand through the prophets, he said in verse two.

What is that news? For starters. Your God reigns. He reigns. And according to Paul's introduction to this letter, God reigns in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The kingly son of the line of David, whose resurrection from the dead brought about by the power of the spirit leaves no doubt that he is the son of God. Jesus, the Messiah.

The Lord. And like the prophets before him, Paul has a purpose. He has received grace to be an apostle. He says in verse five to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name.

Among all the nations. Paul works to bring about the obedience of faith for the name, the reputation of the God who is the source of this good news.

[3 : 27] My people shall know my name, the Lord said through Isaiah. They shall know that I'm faithful to my promises. They shall know my reputation.

They shall know that I am the one who saves them and save them. He will. Isaiah says not just circumstantially, but in totality by removing the guilt of their sin.

And so our apostle says in verse 15, the final verse of our text this morning, I am eager to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome.

That is the main point of our text. Beginning in verse eight, Paul uses all of his statements to build to this.

I am eager, he says eager to preach the gospel to you in Rome. In English, we need a phrase to describe what Paul wants.

[4 : 30] He wants to preach the gospel. In Greek, we need only one word. The verb. One galizom. I.

You're more likely familiar with the noun derived from the same root. One galion usually translated in the New Testament as the gospel. Literally, the good news.

So to say in English what Paul says in Greek using one verb, we need a phrase to preach the gospel. If we could do what Greek does, we might simply say that Paul wanted to gospelize the Romans.

That verb. That verb. That verb he uses. Oangelizomai is the same word used in the Greek version of the Old Testament in Isaiah 52.

And Paul knew Isaiah very well. Because Isaiah 52 and later also Isaiah 61 are the key Old Testament texts from which we get the name gospel.

[5 : 35] And its primary content as God's rule and reign in the world. It's what Jesus calls the kingdom of God. How beautiful are the feet of him who brings good news.

And the news is this. Your God reigns. I am eager, Paul says, to gospelize.

To bring good news. To preach the gospel to you in Rome. It's in Rome. We can't quite imagine what Rome meant in Paul's world.

I like this quote from Bishop Stephen Neal cited by John Stott. Rome. She was the eternal city which had given them peace.

The fount of law. The center of civilization. The Mecca of poets and orators and artists. And at the same time, the home of every kind of idolatrous worship.

[6 : 40] Rome meant imperial power and pride. It was spoken of with awe. Everyone hoped to visit Rome. Just to see it. Just to wonder.

But something had happened in Rome. In that city of a million plus inhabitants, there was a small group of people who had declared allegiance to Jesus.

They were not a greatly impressive lot. The rich and powerful lived up in the seven hills. The famous seven hills on which the city stands east of the river Tiber.

But in the low lying areas along that twisting, turning river. So vulnerable to flooding. That's where the poorer people lived. And that's where you would have found most of the first Roman Christians. N.T. Wright says chances are that the first time this letter was read aloud, it was read in a crowded room in someone's house in the low lying poor district, just across the river from the seat of imperial power.

[7 : 54] Imagine that for a second. The most important theological epistle in Christian history. Comes to this small group of believers in Rome.

We should remember that there weren't very many of them in a city of a million. Most estimates put the church at the time Paul wrote at about a hundred. Maybe less.

A hundred people in a million. Gathered in houses for worship and prayer, for teaching and the breaking of bread. They were not many.

They were not rich. They were not powerful. But it was there. There in the heart of an empire whose culture was dominated by a focus on one city and one man.

The Lord Caesar. It's there that there was a group that instead claimed that Jesus Christ was Lord. And for this, for them, Paul thanked God.

[8 : 57] Verse eight. First, of primary importance above all else, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because Paul says your faith is proclaimed in all the world.

Wherever the church had spread, the news that there were Christians in the capital had spread also. Of course, it had. Believers are in Rome.

And God is to be thanked. The faith of which Paul speaks is not some abstract concept. Paul's goal is to bring about the obedience of faith.

That means Paul wants to see people who obey God out of their faith. And so Paul thanks God because it's God who has created a community of faithful persons in Rome.

Paul's complimentary language in these verses leaves us no doubt that this was an authentic Christian community. In fact, at the end of his letter, when he returns to many similar points in chapters 15 and 16, Paul changes his wording slightly.

[10 : 05] He says there of the Romans in chapter 16, verse 19, not that their faith is proclaimed in all the world. But that their obedience is known to all.

So that I rejoice over you, Paul says. Here in Rome was a community that embodied the goal of Paul's apostleship, the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among the nations.

So Paul gives thanks to God. Because the lives of these Roman Christians were different. What they believed had changed their way of life.

And this new life was evidence to the watching world of the gospel. The rule and reign of God. Right here in Rome.

In the midst of the nations. Their belief and trust in the God who raised Jesus from the dead made a difference in how they lived. And now that faith, obedience, reality in the capital of the Roman Empire is known, Paul says, throughout the world.

[11:11] And so naturally, the apostle to the Gentiles longs to be with them, doesn't he? For God is my witness, he says.

God, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his son, that without ceasing, I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will, I may now at last succeed in coming to you.

Paul's service to God and the gospel of his son requires that he get to Rome. And though most of the church there would be unknown to him personally, he lets them know that he intercedes for them regularly.

Paul prayed concerning them. And lest they think he exaggerates it, he calls God as his witness. It has long been his desire to come to Rome.

He knows his desire can only be fulfilled as God wills it. He doesn't presume to know how he'll get there. In fact, Paul sounds uncertain that he will get there at all.

[12:19] It's helpful, I think, to recall where Paul is when he writes this letter. We just finished the book of Acts recently, so I can explain this rather quickly, I think. When finally in Acts 28, Paul makes it to Rome, it's at the end of three years as a prisoner.

Remember that? He had been arrested in Jerusalem in Acts chapter 21. It was with his trip to Jerusalem on the horizon. That Paul wrote to the Romans.

Probably in the year 57. Well, spending a few weeks in Corinth at the end of his third missionary journey. And Acts says that Paul knew that his trip to Jerusalem was going to mean imprisonment and afflictions.

His wording here is no mere formality. It will only be somehow by God's will. That at last he'll make it to Rome.

Consider just for a moment. Paul's situation as he writes this letter. In reading through the entirety of Romans, as I've done now several times, I can't help but think that in the relative calm of his few weeks in Corinth, Paul here feels that it's time now.

[13:36] It's time now to reflect on his mission to date. On its character. On the tensions and dissensions it had provoked. On what had proved to be most important in the gospel he'd been preaching.

What needed to be carefully thought through and set down. I think that in Romans what we see is Paul thinking through his gospel in light of all the controversies it had brought up in his apostolic work.

And now here he has the opportunity to set out his gospel in a full exposition of a sort that would have been previously impossible. You'll be a better reader of Romans if you keep the history of Acts in mind.

In Romans we have Paul, the greatest of theologians, with just enough time on his hands. In Corinth. To put down his understanding that the good news of Jesus, the Messiah, our Lord, is for all who believe.

And he writes it all out and he sends it to the Romans. Perhaps to begin doing what he tells them in verse 11 he wants to do when he gets there.

[14:47] I am longing to see you, he says, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you. He probably didn't have anything specific in mind.

Paul doesn't know them that well. But surely there will be some insight, some ability, some gift Paul can bring to strengthen them. Which I take to mean to strengthen their faith because of verse 12. That is that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. Now that's really quite lovely, isn't it?

Here's Paul putting the faith of this small Roman church on the same level as his own. And happily anticipating the reciprocal blessing of fellowship that he will enjoy with them.

This is not Paul's church. He did not found it. He writes as one who sees an opportunity for mutual encouragement and strengthening. And I think Paul looked forward very much to talking about what they believed.

[15 : 58] To sharing convictions and questions and how faith works out in their lives. And I hope that you too know something of what Paul anticipates.

The joy of having others with whom you talk about matters of faith and life. Every time I travel back to the blessed city of Chicago, there's a friend there.

With whom I have such a relationship. Neither of us likes talking on the phone at all. And so we go months, sometimes even years without even talking to one another.

Just an occasional email. But when I'm back in town, it's priority number one to meet up with my dear friend, Tom.

And we often sit and we talk for hours about faith and all that the Lord is doing and where we are struggling and growing in our hopes and our work for Christ.

[17 : 00] And I leave those times wonderfully strengthened and encouraged. We need that kind of mutual encouragement. The apostle Paul needed it. He was looking forward to it.

And it's lovely to read about it actually happening in Acts 28 and verse 15. How when Paul did finally make it to Rome, Luke says, The brothers there came from quite a distance to meet him.

And on seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage. He took courage from their faith. Oh, he would have come earlier if he could have.

Pick it up again there in verse 13. I want you to know, brethren, that I have often intended to come to you, but thus far have been prevented. I've wanted to come in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles.

Affectionately, Paul refers to them as brethren. We would, of course, say brothers and sisters to mean the same thing. Paul lets them know that he wanted to come earlier, but he couldn't.

[18 : 14] God had other things for him. But now that his third journey is coming to a close and he's about to return to Jerusalem, Paul's thinking here what he later will say in chapter 15, verse 23.

I no longer have any room for work in these regions. He's in Corinth. Remember, I have longed for many years to come to you. I want to come, he says, to reap some harvest.

Reap some harvest could be more literally translated. Have some fruit. Generally, when Paul uses that word fruit, he means the fruit of faith, the practice of the Christian life, the fruit of the spirit, as he puts it elsewhere.

I think he means the same fruit that he's already seeing in them and for which he's already been thanking God. The same fruit that's the goal of his whole apostleship, the obedience of faith.

They're already showing such fruit. Paul just really wants some of it to be his. So while he certainly hopes to win new converts in Rome, I think he here expresses his hope to enjoy a deeper ministry to those who already are Christians.

[19 : 33] To strengthen them in their faith, to build up the believers that they would demonstrate the fruits of a life lived in service to the Lord Jesus Christ. The obedience of faith among all the nations, because indeed the gospel is for all the nations.

And Paul is under obligation, he says in verse 14. Literally a debtor in the sense that he has a great gift to give away the gift of the gospel for the Gentiles, both to the Greeks and to the barbarians, to the cultured and the uncultured.

Those of refined language and those of barbaric tongues. Both to the wise and to the foolish, he says, to the intelligent and to the non-educated.

The gospel knows of no distinction among persons by cultural status or educational background. It is good news for all. Paul will not shrink back from it in the face of sophisticated Rome.

It is the sense of obligation to all the Gentiles that then explains his eagerness to come to Rome. Because all roads lead to Rome.

[20 : 45] So Paul concludes, I am eager to preach the gospel to you. We're back now where we started. That Paul desires to gospelize.

To be the messenger who brings good news. Who says to them, your God reigns. And I hope, given that all that Paul has said, that my final point can already be made in your minds.

That Paul's not talking here about evangelism. He says, I'm eager to preach the gospel to you. Who's he talking to?

Well, I think the easiest way to read it is that Paul's still talking to the same group of Christians in Rome that he just greeted. And for whom he thanks God and prays that he might visit to strengthen them.

I say that's the easiest way to read it. But for some reason, I fought that all week. All week long.

[21 : 54] In fact, I said a different thing in our staff Bible study on Wednesday. All week long, I tried to make the U in verse 15 a different group than the U of verses 8 to 14.

But I can't do it. This isn't a statement about Paul wanting to preach the gospel to the masses in Rome. Now, he did preach to nonbelievers in Rome.

Acts 28 tells us that Paul always did that. But in verse 15 of chapter one, that's not what he's on about. Paul wants to gospelize the believers in Rome.

Like the messenger of Isaiah who comes to say to God's people. Your God reigns. We don't usually think about preaching the gospel to believers.

But once again, if Paul's aim is, as he puts it in verse five, to bring about the obedience of faith among the Gentiles, then this makes sense. Because as important as initial conversions are, Paul wants fruit.

[23 : 02] He wants ongoing, lifelong, consistent obedience to the ways of God. Why? Because that's what will witness to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ before all nations.

Christian, when what we believe has changed our way of life, then our faith. Or can I say it as Paul does to signal the same reality?

Then our obedience. Will be evidence to the watching world that our God does indeed reign. And it will be for the sake of his name, the reputation of our God among the nations.

Paul wants to visit the church in Rome. He wants to preach the gospel to the church in Rome. And he writes this magnificent letter to the church in Rome that they might bear even more fruit as the result of his ministry.

That's what we're trying to do here every single week. Every single week from this pulpit, we aim to preach the gospel.

[24 : 08] And we preach it primarily to believers. Yes, there are nonbelievers here, even this morning. But the primary audience of this weekly proclamation of the word of God is the people of God.

Every time I preach, my prayer is that fruit will result. God gives the fruit, of course. But it's also what I'm working for.

Because I want more and more of the obedience of faith in my life and in your life, all for the sake of the name of Jesus, for the sake of his name in our neighborhood.

And in our city. And in this country. And in the world. That's what I want in Vancouver.

That's what Paul wanted in Rome. And that's what Isaiah wanted, too. At the end of Isaiah 61, another great chapter about this good news of God.

[25 : 14] Comes this promise. That where the good news is heard and believed. The Lord will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before the nations who are watching us.

That's what Paul wanted in coming to Rome. May it also be so among us. Thanks be to God. Amen.