

A Reminder

Romans 15:14-21

“Putting you in mind,” is the King James Version’s way of saying “Reminding you.” And that’s what Paul says in verse 15 that he is doing in this letter to the Church in Rome, a church he admits in verse 22 that he has not yet visited.

And that’s one of the things that sets Paul’s letter to the Romans apart. The letters that he wrote to the churches at Corinth, in Galatia, at Ephesus, at Philippi, and at Thessalonica, were all sent to congregations he had helped organize. And although he never seems to have visited Colossae, the church there was probably planted by members of the church in Ephesus, where Paul had ministered for 2 years. In other words, Paul’s other letters to churches were written to people he knew, following up on questions or problems he had already discussed with them. That’s why many of those letters can be confusing, a bit like listening to one half of a telephone conversation and trying to figure out what the other party is saying.

In contrast, this letter was written before Paul’s visit to the church in Rome, a church which had already been planted sometime earlier. Paul is thus not presenting the gospel the way an evangelist would, as something new to the Roman Church, but as something they already knew about. Paul is writing in order to put them in mind, to remind them of things they had already heard.

And such reminders are still valuable for us today. In fact, I’m told that Rev. Daniels used to say that preaching was not so much composed of what we need to be told as of what we need to be reminded. And that’s certainly true for most of the folks in this room. Many of you have been walking with Christ a lot longer than I have, and, just as Paul described the Roman Christians in verse 14, you demonstrate your knowledge of the gospel by the way you share the goodness of God in your lives. Because you know the Ten Commandments, you know the Moral Law of God, His basic rules for human living. Because you know the Apostles’ Creed, you understand enough about Christ and His ministry to share the gospel with someone who needs to come to faith in Him, or with another Christian who needs some encouragement.

But don’t we all need that sort of encouragement from time to time? In fact, isn’t that one reason why we come to worship every week? Of course we are here to lift our voices in praise to God, giving Him thanks for all He has done for us, and asking His blessing on us and our loved ones. But in spite of whatever knowledge we already have, no matter how much of the Scriptures we study by ourselves, we come together to be reminded of the great truths Paul has spoken of in this letter.

And why do we need such gospel reminders, the same way the Roman Christians did? Not least because Satan loves to discourage us. He loves to tell us that we’re no good. He loves to accuse us every time we fall into temptation. And, like all good liars, he’s at least partly right. After all, in 3:23 Paul makes it quite clear that all of us are in fact sinners, that all human beings have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. In chapter 6, Paul goes so far as to say that we all started out in life as slaves of sin, and that we were completely helpless to save ourselves. In short, we all need continual reminders of the gospel because of our continuing need for a Savior.

But in verse 16, Paul also said that he wrote this letter so that the offering up of the Gentiles might be acceptable to God. That means he didn’t just want the Gentiles to know they were lost in their

sins. No, he wanted to preach the gospel to them so that their very lives might be offered up to God, so that they might be saved from their sins and restored to a right relationship with God.

And how is this kind of salvation possible? What is the good news that Jesus came to give us? As Paul says in 5:8, God has demonstrated His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Yes, we are all sinners, rebels against God's righteous rule, helpless to save ourselves from the death penalty we all deserve. And yet, God gave the gracious gift of His Son to atone for the sins of the whole world, allowing Jesus to die in our place, and thus justifying, making us righteous in the sight of God. Because Jesus died on the cross, God no longer condemns His people.

Ah, but how does anyone gain access to this gift? Not by working to keep the Law of Moses – Paul showed us in Romans chapter 2 that is simply impossible. Instead in chapter 4, he points to the example of Abraham, as recorded in Genesis chapter 15. At that time in Abraham's life, he had no children, and he and his wife Sarah were much too old to start a family. But when Abraham asked God who would be the heir of all his possessions, God said that Abraham would in fact have as many descendants as there are stars in the sky.

And what did Abraham do when God made him a promise that was simply impossible, a promise that Abraham had no strength in and of himself to keep? Paul reminds us in 4:3 – Abraham believed God, Abraham trusted God to do the impossible. And God counted Abraham's faith in Him as righteousness. In the same way, all of us helpless, hopeless sinners are simply called to trust God to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, to apply the saving work of Christ to us, to accept Jesus' death instead of our own. In short, as Paul has been telling us over and over throughout this letter, we are saved through faith alone in Christ alone.

But when Paul said in verse 16 of today's passage that he wrote this letter so that the offering of the Gentiles might be acceptable, this doesn't just refer to the salvation of their souls. It also refers to the things that they themselves would offer up to God – the things they would do, the devoted obedience of their lives, not good works they would perform in order that they might be saved, but deeds of love and thanks offered to God for the salvation He had already given them. Paul thus reminds us that we are not saved from death and Hell just so that we can do whatever we want to do. No, God has saved us so that we might obey His Law, not out of fear, but out of love. God has saved us so that we might draw close to Him, aligning our wills with His, bringing all our thoughts, feelings, and actions to Him in order that He might be pleased.

And Paul has given us lots of ideas about how to do this, how to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, and acceptable unto God, hasn't he? Starting in chapter 12, he has reminded us that God has given all of us different gifts to share with others in the Body of Christ. Repeating the words of Christ, he has told us that we must love not only our friends, but also our enemies. He has challenged us to be good citizens, obeying the laws and doing the best we can to make sure that those who are in positions of authority are also determined to do God's will. He has reminded us to put on the armor of light, living lives of love and purity. And, as we've studied over the last few weeks, he has reminded us to pursue harmony within the Body of Christ, studying God's Word and doing the best we can to obey it, all the while recognizing that all Christians won't agree with us on everything. We demonstrate Christ's love for all Christians by welcoming them the way Christ continues to welcome us, in spite of our sins and flaws.

And we have even more reason to give all of our lives to God when we remember that our salvation is completely wrought, accomplished by Christ. In verses 18 and 19, Paul gives Jesus all the credit for everything that has taken place in Paul's ministry – for all of Paul's words and deeds, for all the signs and wonders that Paul performed in the power of the Spirit. But if we take this part of Paul's reminder seriously, we will find great comfort for our own lives as well.

For if Jesus wrought, accomplished everything that took place during Paul's ministry, that means Jesus was basically responsible for all those Gentiles who came to faith everywhere Paul preached. And that means the same thing is true today. For Jesus not only paid the complete ransom for us when He died on the cross. No, He is also the One Who, through the power of His Holy Spirit, has given all of us new life when we were dead in our sins. It is Christ alone Who has given all His people the power to respond to His grace with faith.

And just as He did during Paul's ministry, Christ has accomplished our salvation not only through His deeds but by through His word. By His perfect life and sacrificial death, He has fulfilled all the ceremonies and prophecies of the Old Testament – and that proves to us that God's Word can be trusted. And in His Word, the same word He spoke to Paul and that Paul and the other apostles and prophets wrote down for us, Christ has told us everything we need to know to be saved, everything we need to know to share the gospel with others who have not yet learned to trust Him.

And it is this evangelistic power of the Word that may be the most amazing thing about the Book of Romans. For remember, Paul wrote this letter to a church that he had not planted, a church he had not yet visited. As such, he may have thought this letter was a bit of a sideline from his main calling. After all, he makes it quite clear in verses 20 and 21 that his main passion was to plant churches in places where there was no church. So focused was he on this evangelistic ministry that, as he says in verse 22, he was hindered time and time again from making the visit to Rome that he wanted to make. He just couldn't make room in his schedule to visit an already-existing, basically healthy church when there were so many other people in so many other places who hadn't yet heard about Jesus.

And yet, precisely because Paul took the time to write to remind these Roman Christians about what they already knew, this letter has been cherished and treasured by the Church throughout the centuries. Because it provides such a full, clear expression of the gospel, it forms the foundation of most of our understanding of the great doctrines of the Reformation – that God saves His people by His grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

So, isn't it strange that this letter to an existing church, this sideline to Paul's ministry of evangelism, has done so much evangelistic work? For many people have come to faith in Christ simply by reading its words. St. Augustine, in his Confessions, tells of how his life of pleasure-seeking came to an end when he took up the Book of Romans and read Paul's call to holiness in chapter 13. Paul's words brought a libertine to his knees and caused him to devote the rest of his life to Christ.

In the same way, over a thousand years later, Martin Luther was similarly transformed. He had tried for years to earn his salvation through the monastic regimen of good works, but to no avail. Then, as he meditated on Romans 1:17, his life was changed. He wrote, "Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that 'the just shall live by his faith.' Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God

justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise.”

Yes, it turns out there is a lot power in Paul’s words of reminder. So, now that we’ve been reminded of these essential truths of the gospel, knowing that we’ve been saved by God’s grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, will we also offer up our lives of obedience to God? Will we give Jesus all the credit for our salvation, telling one another of His amazing grace? And will we share this good news with a world who needs Him so much?