

Sunday, January 27, 2013

HOPE RISING FROM PATHWAYS OF PROVIDENCE

Romans 1:1-15

It has been said that men of great achievement and accomplishment are not always set apart because of their skill, but because of their attitude.

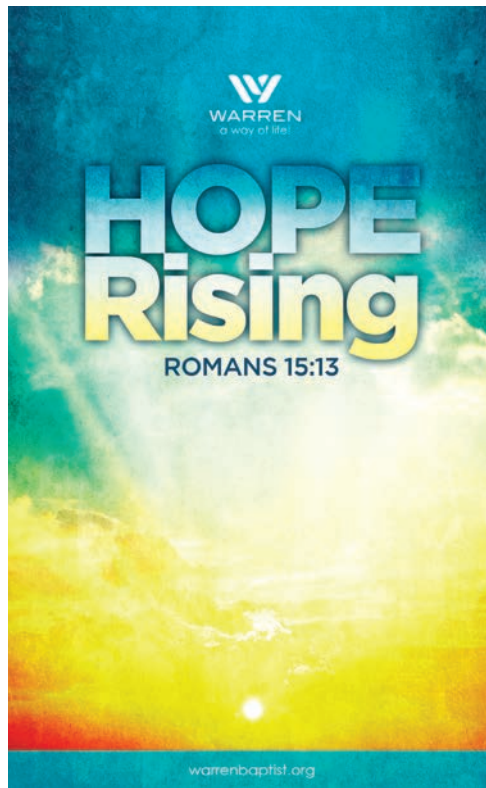
Many people have skills that are good, functional and useful. Although they have skills, it doesn't mean they have the disposition and attitude to achieve and accomplish all they desire. Most great achievements are accomplished by common people who have an uncommon purpose in their hearts.

Several days ago, a friend told me he is planning to scale Mount Kilimanjaro by the end of this year and take a cross to the apex as a way of commemorating his 40-year anniversary in ministry. Mt. Kilimanjaro in Africa is the tallest freestanding mountain in the world, rising 19,340 feet above sea level. I thought, *"That is an incredible undertaking."* Then I paused to reflect on the fact that in October of this year, I will celebrate my 30th anniversary in ministry. I was planning to commemorate my anniversary by going out for a piece of pie. Needless to say, there is a difference in our disposition and attitude about anniversaries.

Persistent climbing requires an incredible amount of determination and tenacity. When you increase the speed and elevation on a treadmill or climb multiple levels of stairs, it doesn't take long before you face the fatigue factor.

In much the same way, we are beginning our "climb" in the book of Romans. We will continue to climb week after week, month after month until we reach the end of the book. I can't think of a summit more worthy of scaling together than the book of Romans—a real "stairway to heaven."

Let's begin.



"Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God..." (Romans 1:1 ESV).

The first word we read is "Paul." In order to understand the book of Romans and its importance, we need to know some things about the Apostle Paul. First, how does Paul identify himself? "...a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God..." (Romans 1:1 ESV).

Last week, we talked about "the gospel of God" being the theme of the entire book of Romans. Everything Romans teaches goes back to a comprehensive understanding of the gospel of God.

The book of Romans wasn't written and then left in a drawer to be found later. It was a letter that was penned and sent by Paul to a specific group of people.

"To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. For God is my witness, 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. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. 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 1:7-15 ESV).

Rome—big place, big city, important center. Paul wants to go to Rome for one purpose: to impact that city with the gospel.

Nowhere does Paul express who he is, his heart or what he is about more than in these opening verses. Although Paul penned these words many centuries ago, it feels as though we are listening to a conversation Paul is having today with people he cares about.

It is interesting to know Paul was writing to people he had never seen or met before. Today, the recipients of this letter would be our "friends" we only know through Facebook, Twitter, or some other social media. They were people somewhere "out there," but people with whom Paul wanted to connect.

As we proceed through these opening verses, let's do some "channel surfing." Let's start with something like A&E and the Biography Channel... then the History Channel... and back to today's local news.

First, biography.

PAUL ON LIFE

The Apostle Paul was the "human pen," the human author of Romans. Paul tells us many things about himself, not only in Romans, but also in other letters he wrote in Scripture.

It is said that cats have nine lives. You know why? They are residual. They often escape danger. They are prone to up-right themselves no matter what position they are in. If you have a cat upside down and you let them go, what happens? They land on their feet. They have an ability to walk away from imminent danger.

People have at least three lives. There are three people sitting in your seat today. The three lives that define your life are the same three lives that defined Paul's life:

1. Where You Have Come From
2. Where You are Now
3. Where You are Heading Tomorrow

You are a person moving through life—moving from where you were to where you are now... to the place you will go when you leave here today... tomorrow... next week, and so forth. Many of you are already there in your minds. Others of you are here, but you are reflecting back to the past.

Let's look at Paul.

WHERE PAUL IS FROM TARSUS—JERUSALEM—DAMASCUS

In order to understand the significance of Paul's letter, we have to understand something about where Paul is from. The story of Paul's life could be called, *A Tale of Three Cities: Tarsus, Jerusalem, Damascus*.

Paul was originally from Tarsus. In the ancient world, Tarsus was a university town located in what is modern day Turkey. Paul's family was Jewish. In fact, when we first meet Paul, he bears the Jewish name, Saul, after one of the first great kings of Israel. It was in Tarsus that Saul [Paul] had an opportunity to get an education.

I say this because in the ancient world there were three great centers of learning: Athens, Alexandria, Tarsus. In many ways, these "universities" were like Harvard, Princeton, and Yale today. We could say Paul was somewhat of an "ivy leaguer." He was clearly a scholar.

Paul was from Tarsus in his roots and education, but he eventually came with his family to Jerusalem, the center of Jewish heritage and culture. In Jerusalem, Paul studied under Gamaliel, an astute and learned rabbi, professor and teacher. Gamaliel was the grandson of Hillel. Although these names may not be recognizable today (even amid modern day Judaism), Hillel was among the greatest and most significant scholars in Judaism and possibly the greatest leader who ever lived in Jewish history.

In Jerusalem, Paul learned the law and about Jewish culture, and both have a profound impact on him. Yes, Paul had knowledge and skill; but he also had the attitude, disposition and desire to apply what he had learned. We first meet Saul [Paul] in the book of Acts:

"But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison" (Acts 8:3 ESV).

The greatest adversary and obstacle of the church in the days following the death and ascension of Christ was this young man named Saul. He was a pharisee, a zealot. And armed with his knowledge of the law, he tried to crush the growing movement of Christ-followers.

Have you seen the recent release of the movie, *Les Misérables*? Javert is the central character in the story, played by Russell Crowe. Javert is a man dedicated to the enforcement of the law. He has condemned himself and spends his life trying to condemn others. He is cruel, heartless, brutal. Saul is similar to both purpose and disposition when we first meet him in the book of Acts.

One day Saul decided to leave Jerusalem in order to chase and track this movement of believers. On the road to Damascus (heading toward modern day Syria), Paul had an encounter with Someone he could not run over, something Paul could not break through.

Paul later tells about this encounter as he stands before King Agrippa as

a prisoner in the outdoor arena at Caesarea Philippi:

"I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities. In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?... And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting'" (Acts 26:9-15 ESV).

Saul of Tarsus; Saul the Christian-killer; Saul, who hated everything about Christ and Christians, had a face-to-face encounter with his greatest enemy. Guess who won. Jesus.

Saul met Jesus in all His glory as Saul traveled to Damascus. And having seen the resurrected and living Christ, Saul of Tarsus became the greatest Christ-follower possibly in all of history. I cannot fully explain everything about this encounter, but I can tell you this: Saul went after the saints and Jesus went after Saul.

Acts 26:18 tells us that Jesus met Saul, saved him and called him. Why did Jesus do that?

"...to open their eyes [Gentiles], so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me" (Acts 26:18 ESV).

God used the most abstruse tool to become His most effective weapon in changing the world for Christ.

WHERE PAUL IS NOW

“Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God...” (Romans 1:1 ESV).

Saul (who has become Paul) is now a changed person and there are three ways in which he wants to be identified:

- A servant
- An apostle
- A man set apart for the gospel

(1) A servant. It is interesting the word, *servant* (*doulos* in the Greek), is the exact opposite of the word, Lord, used to refer to Jesus Christ. Jesus was now Paul’s Lord and Paul was now the servant, the slave of Christ.

Paul no longer lives in arrogance, asserting his knowledge and intelligence. He is a broken man, a sinner who now knows the obligation of his life is to be a servant of Jesus Christ. Although Paul has no rights to himself, he doesn’t beat himself down as a servant. Instead, he identifies himself as . . .

(2) An apostle. An apostle was someone specifically called by God who had also seen the resurrected and living Christ.

The original disciples (after the resurrection of Christ) are called apostles. Paul was the one added to their number who was not a part of the original group. Paul was called to be an apostle by God because God had given Paul the authority and responsibility of establishing the church. Paul knew his apostleship wasn’t something he did on his own authority; it was something God did by grace: “...through whom we have received grace and apostleship”(Romans 1:5 ESV).

(3) A man set apart for the gospel. The root word for *set apart* is the same root word for *horizon*. Paul’s life is now based upon a future horizon that is tied to the gospel of God: Jesus Christ who lived, who died, who rose again.

WHERE PAUL IS GOING

The Apostle Paul is going in one direction that can only be described

as *forward*. Yes, Paul wants to go to Rome, but more than that, Paul is going forward in his life with Christ. That is an important thing to understand about Paul and an important question to ask today: Where are you going in your relationship with Christ?

Sometimes believers move backward rather than forward. In fact, there is an old term used to describe that—*backsliding*. It doesn’t mean people have not had an encounter with Christ; they simply are not walking with Christ. They are complacent. They are not “pressing on” as Paul said: “But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:13-14 ESV).

Paul was a man “on the go.” He knew what it was to move ahead with the gospel.

In the back pages of your Bible, you probably have a map titled, *Missionary Journeys of Paul*. Typically, there are three colors depicting three different journeys Paul made from his homeland of Jerusalem in order to take the gospel to the Gentile world.

Paul was a man who traveled many places and planted churches everywhere he went. Wherever Paul went, there was either a revival or a riot; nothing was mediocre. Big things happened and God used Paul in a very unique way.

Interestingly, Paul could journey by land or sea because of the global connectivity of the Roman empire—“All roads lead to Rome.” But for all the journeys Paul made, he never went to Rome. He wanted to go to Rome. He cared about Rome. He just could never get there.

Paul decided to go ahead and write a letter in advance of his plans. And what a letter Paul wrote!

I love what William Sanday said in his *International Critical Commentary*, possibly the strongest of all commentaries in English on the book of Romans:

“It [Romans] is *testamentary*, meaning it is Paul’s last will and testament. In this book Paul distills the last word on the Christian faith.” It is complete, or literally, comprehensive.

When Paul wrote this letter to those in Rome, he didn’t address issues and problems; his travels did not take him to Rome like they had to Corinth and other places. Instead, Paul set up the standard and ideal of what faith is about.

While Sanday called the book of Romans *testamentary*, Burton, another commentator, referenced Romans as a prophylactic of the church, a guardian against apostasy and heresy. If you know, study and believe this Book, it will lead you to live a holy life because you are going to understand what it means to go forward in your faith with Jesus Christ.

Now let’s surf over to the History Channel.

PAUL ON LOCATION

Paul is focused on the city of Rome. In Paul’s day, there was no city like Rome. It was the absolute cradle of culture. Rome was the cornerstone of Paul’s own citizenship as well as the citizenship of the world. Rome was the place where everyone wanted to be connected. Anybody who was “somebody” was connected to Rome and the Roman Empire. Paul (being called by God to be the apostle to the Gentiles) couldn’t imagine a calling to the Gentiles that didn’t include going to Rome.

People were able to easily trade and travel throughout the empire because of the *Pax Romana* (the peace of Rome), but the focus was Rome. Rome was the center, the hub of the Roman Empire.

Wikipedia provides us with a quick explanation: “Because of the Empire’s vast extent and long endurance, the institutions and culture of Rome had a profound and lasting influence on the development of language, religion, architecture, philosophy, law, and

forms of government in the territory it governed, particularly Europe, and by means of European expansionism throughout the modern world.”

Today, you cannot tell the story of the Western World without including the story of Rome.

Paul didn't write to nondescript inhabitants in order to impact their culture. Paul wrote a specific letter to a specific group of people living in Rome.

“To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints... (Romans 1:7 ESV).

Paul focused on those who had become believers and whose faith he had heard about. These people were citizens of Rome as well as heaven. Paul wrote,

“But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself” (Philippians 3:20-21 ESV).

In the same way, if you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, you are loved of God. You are called to be saints. You are a resident of the CSRA and a citizen of the United States of America, but you also have a citizenship in heaven. Your purpose is more than just a cultural citizenship on earth; it is about who God is and what God desires for you.

Therefore, Paul writes to this group about their uniqueness:

“First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers...” (Romans 1:8-10a ESV).

PRAYER AND PRAISE

Paul begins on a very positive note. He tells them of his prayer and he praises them for their faith. Before Paul knew them, before he had ever met them, he was praying for them. Why is that important? God has a ministry of prayer

for us as citizens of His heavenly city, even here. We are to pray in advance for the impact of the gospel in our community, our nation and places in this world beyond where we are today because God has called us to live “on location” for His purpose.

LONGING AND DESIRE

“...always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you” (Romans 1:10 ESV).

It is important to note that Paul is not only praying for people he has never met, Paul is also asking God to let him be the answer to his own prayer. Paul asks God to let him be the one to go and minister to them.

As a church living on location today in this community, you and I are here to pray for people we don't know yet. And we need to pray that God will send us to meet them. Why? Because of the gospel.

INSIGHT AND STRATEGY

Not only does Paul express his longing and desire, he ultimately expresses a sense of insight and strategy about how he might go and impact those in Rome.

Sometimes missions are talked about in general, optimistic terms rather than strategically. We must be strategic. We must pray that God will send us to places where we can take the gospel and have the most impact with people.

Paul believed the gospel mattered. He believed Rome mattered. And Paul believed his life and mission mattered. Do you believe God has put you on location at this time in Augusta that you might have impact for the gospel of God?

The church is not about us just getting better blessings for ourselves, and it is not just about us enriching and encouraging each other. These are by-products of living on location to fulfill God's purpose and mission.

God called Paul (and us!) to a higher purpose—taking the gospel to others.

PAUL ON LABOR

We've moved from biography to history. Now let's go to local news.

“...through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ” (Romans 1:5-6 ESV).

The focus of our lives today should be on the labor of the gospel in one specific way: to bring about the obedience of faith in us and all the nations. Think about that for a moment... the obedience of faith. Paul knew for himself and for the people of Rome that they didn't belong to themselves; they belonged to Jesus Christ.

You don't serve God for the benefits He gives you (a bigger house, nicer car, better job, sweeter family). No. You have been called by God to the obedience of faith that it may be spread to all the nations. The real question is this: Are you fulfilling the measure of obedience of faith in your life? Are you going forward in your walk with Christ? What about your obedience? Is the obedience of your life and faith all in the past or are the greatest days of obedience in front of you?

We need to ask the same of us as a church. Are our greatest days of obedience behind us? Or is there within our heart, our attitude, our disposition a desire to say, “God make our greatest days of obedience in front of us!”

Personally, I don't want to live off of yesterday's obedience. I thank God for yesterday's obedience that brought maturity, growth and blessing to my life. I have never followed God in obedience that I was not blessed. But I want my greatest days of obedience to be in front of me in mission, ministry, faith, hope and love.

Our hope rises from the pathways of providence. How? Let's follow the trail. God worked in the life of Paul. Through Paul's obedience, God brought obedience to the people of Rome and throughout the world till the gospel

came to you and me that we might also walk in paths of obedience.

Within our American culture—particularly Baptist churches and evangelical circles—the focus is often on praying a prayer and being obedient to the call of salvation. Yes, that is important, but obedience should continue day after day, not just enduring or waiting through the second half of life until we go to heaven.

The nature of true saving faith always moves us forward in obedience to God, and in witness, service, sacrifice, devotion, vision and passion.

You cannot whitewash, Photoshop or sugarcoat the issues of the culture we face today, but you can bring the hope of the gospel to those around you. You are here in this day, in this place by God's providence. I urge you to respond by saying, "Lord, I will obey."

Sharing the hope of the gospel in our community is the passion of my heart. I want Warren to be the bright spot of hope in the darkness. We know the gospel. We love the gospel. We live the gospel. Let's not just fall back on yesterdays; let's move ahead wholeheartedly for the sake of the gospel.

Read how Paul closes this book:

"Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen" (Romans 16:25-27 ESV).

The Christian life is a long obedience in the same direction. Let's keep climbing toward obedience with Christ.

Father, thank you for the Apostle Paul. Thank you for the letter of Romans. Thank you, Lord, for the call that we hear today: to respond in the obedience

of faith. Father, I pray for some who are here today where the first step of faith and obedience still needs to occur. If there is a need for some to call upon the name of the Lord Jesus, may they be saved.

Father, I know there is nothing we can do to be obedient apart from recognizing our need as sinners, to put trust in the Savior. Because of what Christ has done, the answer of the response of your Spirit in our hearts calls us to faith and obedience.

Father, I pray for others who have trusted Christ, but have never taken the simple step of obedience in baptism, demonstrating that their life does not belong to them, but to Christ. I pray they would not simply say, "I'm okay with my baptism," but they would move forward in obedience to faith, following You in baptism as Scripture teaches.

I pray for people here today who need to commit and connect in the church. Lord, I pray You would gather people of faith and faithfulness here that together we might live in the obedience of faith and the blessing of the nations. Thank You for what You are going to do in this moment as You have ministered through Your Word today. In Jesus' name. Amen.

David H. McKinley is Pastor-Teacher of Warren Baptist Church in Augusta, Georgia. This message has been edited for print purposes. You may listen or watch this message in its entirety by visiting warrenbaptist.org.

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