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Enjoying God Ministries

Romans #44

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Go!

Romans 10:14-21

I've got a story to tell you. It concerns a young lady by the name of Jackie. From the age of eight she repeatedly heard in her heart the simple exhortation, "Go." Jackie lived in England, together with her identical twin sister and parents. She graduated from the Royal College of Music in London with a specialization in playing the oboe. At the age of 22 she still couldn't shake the voice that had beckoned her for so many years. With what appeared to be such a vague sense of calling, no missionary organization would sponsor her. She finally decided to follow the advice of a pastor named Richard Thomson, who told her, in so many words, to take a slow boat to China and pray that God would tell her when to get off.

At each port, she felt no prompting to disembark, and thus she continued her journey until in 1966 she arrived in Hong Kong. She had \$10 to her name and didn't know a single soul nor a word of Mandarin. She made her way to what was at that time the Walled City in Kowloon. The Walled City was under the jurisdiction of no government. Neither China nor Great Britain exerted any authority there. Consequently, it became a haven for drug addicts, teen-aged prostitutes, opium dens, and pornographic theaters. The only power in the Walled City was wielded by Chinese criminal gangs known as the Triads.

The Walled City sat on 5½ acres of land and housed upwards of 55,000 men, women, and children. Since there were no laws governing the Walled City, there was no running water and no electricity. Open sewers flowed along the pathways inside. Each level of the City was simply constructed on top of one after another. There were no building codes. Because of the shoddy construction, over time the City began to cave in on itself, effectively shutting out all light from the outside. If a police officer dared to enter the Walled City, his body would likely be found, tossed aside along with the garbage that piled up outside its boundaries.

Jackie set up a youth center inside the Walled City and began sharing the gospel at every opportunity and praying for the sick. Although the Walled City was torn down when Great Britain turned Hong Kong back over to Chinese control, Jackie has remained, working with drug addicts and laboring to deliver young girls who had been trafficked as sex objects. She is there today, faithfully serving others at the age of 77.

Why in the world would a single young lady from England do something so incredibly dangerous? The answer is found here in our text today. Jackie knew enough of her Bible to realize that it is only those who call upon the name of the Lord that will be saved. She learned this from Romans 10:13. She also knew, from Romans 10:14 and following, that a person couldn't call on his name if they didn't believe in him as Lord, and that he had been raised from the dead. She also knew that people couldn't believe in someone of whom they had never heard. And it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that if they were to

believe, they had to hear the good news of the gospel preached to them. And the only way someone might preach to them is if they were sent.

So, if I may now come full circle back around to Jackie Pullinger at the age of eight, you can understand the significance of that single word, “Go,” that she knows without question was the voice of the Holy Spirit. I look at Jackie’s life and ministry now, with her at the age of 77, and I think of the hundreds, if not thousands, who came to saving faith in Jesus Christ through her ministry. I think of the hundreds, if not thousands, of former opium and heroin addicts who were delivered through her faithful prayer ministry. And I say, with Paul in v. 15, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”

But wait. Did she really have to “go”? If God wanted to save the many souls in the Walled City, he could have done it without her, couldn’t he? She could have stayed in London and pursued a career in music, playing the oboe in some famous orchestra. If God had determined in eternity past to save souls according to his sovereign mercy, why did he send Jackie Pullinger halfway around the world to Hong Kong?

The answer is one you’ve already heard and seen today. No one can be saved unless they call, and no one can call unless they believe, and no one can believe unless they hear, and no one can hear unless someone preaches, and no one preaches unless they are sent.

Let’s unpack vv. 14-15 in reverse order. God sends forth preachers. Preachers preach. When preachers preach, people hear. Hearers believe. Believers call. All who call are saved. But don’t think that the words “preach” and “preaching” refer only to what I do on a Sunday morning. He has in mind the communication of the gospel by every Christian. Whether you travel on a slow boat to China and land in Hong Kong or you walk across the street to your neighbors back yard, it is all the same. The issue isn’t how far you travel or whether you feel qualified or how much you know. The issue is taking seriously the absolute necessity of making the gospel known to the people in your world, because it is absolutely necessary for them to hear if they are to believe, and it is absolutely necessary for them to believe and call on the name of the Lord if they are to be saved.

Before I leave this verse let’s be perfectly clear on what is meant by “calling” on the name of the Lord. People “call” on God all the time, usually in times of some threat or danger they are facing or perhaps a financial emergency. Or it may be in a fit of rage and their “call” is a profane denunciation of Jesus. But the sort of “call” that leads to salvation is one in which a broken, repentant, desperate sinner cries out and appeals to Jesus to bestow his forgiving grace. There is a very real sense in which we might even make use of the word “call” to define what it is to be a Christian. Here is how Paul described the believers in first-century Corinth:

“To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours” (1 Cor. 1:2).

Deferring to the Mystery

But didn't Paul say earlier in Romans 8 and 9 that those whom God foreknew in eternity past he predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ? And didn't he say that those whom he predestined he also called, and those he called he also justified, and those who are justified he glorifies? Yes. But Paul also tells us here, in no uncertain terms, that it is equally true that to be saved and justified and ultimately glorified one must hear and believe the gospel. One must call on the name of the Lord.

Are these two truths contradictory? Does one negate or preclude the other? No. That doesn't mean I or anyone else can decipher this mystery. I believe both of these declarations in Romans not because I can explain how they are compatible but because it is ultimately God, through Paul, who is the author of both.

It's fascinating, and also a bit frustrating, to observe how Christians of all stripes and theological convictions and denominational loyalties deal with apparent contradictions in the Bible. I emphasize the word "apparent" because I don't believe any truth in the bible contradicts another. I do not believe that God's sovereignty in salvation undermines or is inconsistent with the urgent need to preach the gospel and evangelize the lost. And I don't believe that the necessity of personal faith in Jesus Christ is in any way contrary to the sovereignty of God's saving mercy.

As I said, for some, these two biblical truths are totally incompatible. The only way to resolve the conflict, so they say, is to diminish or even altogether eliminate one or the other. So, some choose to deny God's sovereignty. God does his best to save sinners, but in the final analysis it is up to the free will decision of each individual man or woman. Others go in the opposite direction. They affirm God's sovereignty and diminish the importance and necessity of preaching the gospel and urgency of personal faith in Jesus Christ.

I hope you can see that both are wrong.

When you try to explain to people that both are true, they think one of two things. They assume either that you are compromising, or that you are asking them to believe that 2+2 really does equal 4. But there may be a better way, a third way of handling these sorts of things. It may well be that there is in fact a perspective that embraces both with equal emphasis without diminishing the truth of either one.

Take, for example, Paul's ministry in the city of Corinth. We read in Acts 18 how the Lord appeared to Paul in a vision to encourage and fortify him for continued work in Corinth, notwithstanding heated opposition. "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, *because I have many people in this city.*"

Paul might have responded to this information in several ways. He could have said to himself: "Well, now, I think I shall ask God for the names and addresses of his elect people so that it will save me the time and effort of having to preach to everyone." Or perhaps he might have said: "It is good to know this, for it frees me to go elsewhere. After all, if they are God's elect people, they will eventually come to faith whether I evangelize the city or not."

But Paul did nothing of the sort. Far from being discouraged or dissuaded from his evangelistic zeal, far from being reduced to passive reliance on a secret sovereign decree, he immediately returned to the city and stayed for a year and a half (v. 11). Precisely because he knew that God had sheep in Corinth, he labored there diligently.

Nothing is more of a stimulus to evangelistic zeal and effort than the assurance of success, which the truth of sovereign election alone can give. “So far from making evangelism pointless,” observes Packer, “the sovereignty of God in grace is the one thing that prevents evangelism from being pointless. For it creates the possibility – indeed, the certainty – that evangelism will be fruitful. Apart from it, there is not even a possibility of evangelism being fruitful. Were it not for the sovereign grace of God, evangelism would be the most futile and useless enterprise that the world has ever seen, and there would be no more complete waste of time under the sun than to preach the Christian gospel” (*Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, 106).

Why do I say it? Because were it not for sovereign grace regenerating hearts and enabling the unbelieving to believe, heaven would remain forever barren of life. Apart from sovereign grace that makes us alive, we would do as well screaming at a corpse in the county morgue, “Rise up and live!” Evangelism is possible and will bear fruit for one reason: God in sovereign grace is in the business of making alive and renewing hearts that they might love him whom they formerly despised. We may choose to exhaust ourselves preaching fluently, cogently, unceasingly, and sincerely, handing out tracts, organizing revival services, and availing ourselves of every conceivable opportunity to reach the lost. But unless there is God’s sovereign and merciful grace working in the lives of those to whom we preach, it is hopeless.

Evangelism is successful because God does what we cannot do. What happens here at Bridgeway on a Sunday morning is successful because God does what I cannot do. Paul returned to preach in Corinth because the sovereignty of God gave him “hope of success as he preached to deaf ears, and held up Christ before blind eyes, and sought to move stony hearts. His confidence was that where Christ sends the gospel there Christ has His people – fast bound at present in the chains of sin, but due for release at the appointed moment through a mighty renewing of their hearts as the light of the gospel shines into their darkness, and the Saviour draws them to Himself” (Packer, 116-17).

The central issue here is that salvation does not simply happen willy-nilly, as if in a vacuum. Rather it happens in the context and as a result of faithful proclamation and explanation of the gospel by you and by me. Faith does not come by any other means, neither by hereditary descent nor by church attendance nor participation in the sacraments. Charles Spurgeon said it best:

“Faith cannot be washed into us by immersion, nor sprinkled upon us in christening; it is not to be poured into us from a chalice, nor generated in us by a consecrated piece of bread. There is no magic about it; it comes by hearing the word of God, and by that way only.”

Paul’s conclusion to all this is to cite the affirmation of God found in Isaiah 52:7 - “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” (Rom. 10:15b). This is just one part of a larger text drawn from Isaiah 52:7,

“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’” (Isa. 52:7).

We tend to think of beautiful feet as those that have just returned from getting a high-priced, professional pedicure, with soft, well-tanned, polished toenails. But the Bible envisions beautiful feet as those that are calloused and scarred, dirty and soiled from taking the gospel into previously unreached regions of the earth, perhaps over rugged terrain or through dangerous, snake-infested swamps. Of course, it isn't just the feet of those who preach that are regarded as beautiful in the eyes of God. It is every part of their physical frame that has endured hardship in the effort to bring good news to those who've never heard it. It is every facet of their emotional and mental constitution that has suffered in order to preach the gospel.

Unbelief in Israel

Sadly, the majority in Israel have disobeyed the gospel. They have refused to believe in Jesus as the promised Messiah who would suffer and die for his people. That is Paul's point in v. 16. Their unbelief was anticipated by the OT prophet Isaiah in his rhetorical question: “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” (Isa. 53:1). If people are to have faith, Paul says in v. 17, they must hear the gospel. And the gospel or the word they must hear and believe concerns the person of Jesus Christ.

So why have so many in Israel not believed? Perhaps Israel has a legitimate excuse for not believing. Perhaps they never *heard* the gospel. Or perhaps if they heard it, they didn't *know* or *understand* what they were hearing. These attempts to exonerate or excuse Israel's unbelief are raised and answered in vv. 18-21.

Contrary to what some may say, Israel has heard. To make his point Paul appeals to Psalm 19:4. In that passage the psalmist is talking about the universal display of God's existence and glory in the natural creation:

“The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world” (Ps. 19:1-4a).

Paul finds in v. 4 of this psalm a principle that applies to the proclamation of the truth to the Jewish people. Just as God makes himself known as the Creator in the natural world, he makes himself known as Savior through the preaching of the gospel.

But wait! The language in v. 18 appears to be quite universal. Does Paul really mean to say that the voice or message of the gospel “has gone out to all the earth,” indeed “to the ends of the world”? There are, I believe two possible ways of taking Paul's language.

It may be that he has in mind the Jewish world. In other words, he may be saying that wherever there are Jewish people living, wherever Israelites may be found, they have had the gospel of Jesus Christ made known to them. Wherever a Jewish community existed, there the gospel has been preached.

There is another possibility. We struggle with v. 18 because we live 2,000 years after Paul. We live in a world where we know of the existence of people all around the globe. For us today, given our advanced understanding of the earth and its people, to say that a message has gone “to the ends of the world” means to people “down under,” in Australia, and to people at the north pole, and to people in southern Africa, and to people in Ireland and in distant Siberia.

But when Paul was alive and wrote these statements, “all the earth” and “the ends of the world” referred to the inhabited regions of the then known Roman empire. It is profoundly unfair and inappropriate to read our global perspective on the earth back into a time when the far reaches of the world had not even been discovered. Since we are coming out of the Christmas season, let me give you an example from the story of the birth of Christ. You may recall that there was a reason why Joseph took his pregnant wife Mary to Bethlehem, where Jesus was to be born. We read this in Luke 2:1,

“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered” (Luke 2:1).

Everyone agrees that when Luke wrote the words “all the world” he meant the inhabited Roman empire where Joseph and Mary and other Jewish people were living. No one takes him to mean Greenland and Indonesia and North America. Luke uses the Greek word *oikoumenē*, translated “world” in our English versions. This is the same word Paul uses in the second half of v. 18 when he speaks of the “world” to which the words of the gospel have gone forth. So, when we read v. 18 from within the mindset and quite limited perspective of someone living in the first century, we discover that what might first appear to us in the twenty-first century as universal and global language is in fact much more narrow in scope.

But there may be another reason why so many in Israel didn’t believe the gospel. I’ll grant you that Israel heard the gospel. They had received the revelation of God concerning the coming Messiah. But maybe they didn’t understand it. That is why they rejected Jesus.

Well, no, says Paul. They most certainly did understand. In saying they *do* know, Paul is not contradicting Romans 10:2-3 where he affirmed Israel's ignorance. In one sense they know, in that the knowledge has been made accessible to them, and yet they do not *savingly* know, in that they have rejected it. This is similar to what Paul wrote in Romans 1:21 where he described how people “knew God” but “did not honor him as God or give thanks to him.”

To make his point, Paul first quotes from the words of Moses and then from the words of Isaiah. The words of Moses are taken from Deuteronomy 32:21.

“I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation; with a foolish nation I will make you angry” (Rom. 10:19b; Deut. 32:21).

The “not a nation” and the “foolish nation” mentioned here are pagan, uncircumcised Gentiles who unlike Israel are responding to the truth of God’s revelation. Paul’s hope is that this would stir up jealousy among the Jewish people and open their eyes to the gospel. Paul makes much the same point in v. 20, once again quoting the words of Isaiah,

“I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me” (Isa. 65:1).

The point, one more time, is that Gentiles who had not previously sought after God are now finding salvation in Jesus Christ. The purpose yet again is that this will awaken the people of Israel to the salvation that they were supposed to embrace as God’s covenant people. Sadly, though, v. 21 sums up their response. Paul takes his words from Isaiah 65:2,

“All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people” (Isa. 65:2).

Let’s slow down and explore in more depth precisely what it means to “call” on Christ for salvation. I believe there are at least three elements.

There is first of all an affirmation of the truth of certain facts. It is a declaration of belief that Jesus truly is Lord and that God the Father truly raised him from the dead. If you don’t believe those facts to be true, you cannot be saved.

But saving faith, the sort of “call” that saves, is more than believing facts. James tells us in his epistle that “even the demons believe – and shudder” (James 2:19). Satan and his demons know the truth about the facts of who Jesus is and what he has done. They know he has died for sinners and that he rose from the dead, and yet they will be cast into the lake of fire, as Revelation 20 so clearly tells us. But the sort of faith that saves is trusting in the truth of those facts. It is entrusting one’s eternal destiny to what they mean. It is investing all one’s hope in the reality of who Jesus is and what he has done.

The third element in true saving faith, the faith that “calls” on Christ for salvation, includes an experience of the affections. I have in mind joy and deep spiritual satisfaction, a delight in Jesus and a prizing of him as the treasure of one’s heart. Listen to how Paul describes his own experience of calling on Christ. He says in Philippians 3 that he so greatly rejoices in Christ that he regards all other gain as rubbish. “Indeed, I count everything as loss for the sake of Christ” (Phil. 3:7). It is as if Paul is saying, “I so deeply and with immeasurable delight cherish the beauty and worth and value of Christ and the blessings of knowing him that I happily suffer the loss of everything else!”

Can you say that today of your trust in Christ?

Conclusion

I want to conclude our time in Romans 10 by placing before you once again a mystery that has challenged Christian minds and hearts for centuries, and undoubtedly will continue to do so until Jesus returns.

In Romans 8-9 we saw repeatedly Paul's emphasis on the sovereignty of God's mercy in the salvation of sinners who otherwise deserve nothing but eternal condemnation. And why are some saved? Paul clearly said in Romans 9:16, "So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who has mercy." The final, decisive, and conclusive cause of anyone being saved is God's mercy.

And yet we read in the final verse of Romans 10 that God stands before a disobedient and unbelieving people with hands outstretched, pleading with them to turn from their selfish and idolatrous ways and embrace the gospel of forgiveness.

How can this be? Which is it: God sovereignly saving whom he will, or God extending his hands in mercy to all, urging them to believe? Yes! And No, I can't explain how both are true. Paul makes no effort to explain how these two realities are in perfect harmony. He knows, even as you and I do, that we are finite, limited creatures whose capacity to plumb the depths of God's ways is woefully inadequate. But that does not frustrate the apostle, and it shouldn't frustrate you and me.

The question before us isn't, can you decipher this mystery and make sense of what appears to be a contradiction. The question before us all is, will we humbly submit to what God says in his Word and trust that what appears to us to be $2+2=5$ is in fact still 4?

So, I close with this simple appeal. Marvel at God's sovereign grace and his eternal election unto salvation of hell-deserving sinners. And marvel no less at God's patience and longsuffering and kindness as he extends his open hands to everyone, willing to receive into his embrace and his eternal kingdom anyone who will turn from sin and self and trust in Jesus Christ.

Resist the temptation to align yourself with those who, in the interests of the sincere appeal of God for sinners to be saved, jettison and outright reject his sovereignty over those who are ultimately saved. And resist the temptation to align yourself with those who, in the interests of preserving and protecting God's sovereignty jettison and outright reject the sincere offer of salvation to any and all sinners who will respond to the preached word and believe.

Instead, align yourself with Jesus who, in Matthew 11:27 said, "All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." In the same breath, in the very next verse, this same Jesus is heard to say, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

Can you see God simultaneously **both** as the sovereign Lord whose will is decisive in all matters **and** as a loving Father inviting rebellious men and women to come home? Can you see him as the one who in eternity past foreknew and predestined his elect to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, and

simultaneously as a merciful Savior who “all day long,” without hesitation or hypocrisy, invites disobedient and obstinate people to come home?

If you can align yourself with Jesus in this matter, there is only one thing left for you and me to do. Go! Walk across the street. Cross over to the other side of the office. Send a text message or email. Approach someone standing on the sidelines of the soccer game. Take a friend out to lunch. And share the good news of Jesus Christ with them. You don't have to go to Hong Kong. But you can if you want to!