

ROMANS 15:14-33 OUR GOSPEL PASSION AND MISSION

We have almost finished this journey! Throughout 2006, God has led us through the glorious book of Romans.

This week, we will finish chapter 15. Then we will spend the four weeks of the Advent season in the book of Ruth. Then, on the last Sunday of 2006, we will finish the book of Romans, as we ponder Paul's words in chapter 16.

Let's start with a quiz.

If you are fairly new to our church, you don't have to take the quiz, because I don't expect you to know this.

If you are on the Missions Committee, you don't have to take the quiz, because I am sure you know this.

Here is the quiz. Write down, the seven foreign countries where our church supports missionaries. Don't worry about names. Just countries.

How did you do? How many of these could you name?

The Philippines, Ireland, Germany, Mexico, Belgium, Japan, and Zambia.

The last part of Romans 15 is about missions. It is about spreading the good news about Jesus, to faraway places. Paul is a missionary. Since Jesus captured Paul with his grace, Paul has traveled throughout the regions around the Mediterranean Sea, telling people about Jesus.

Now Paul's missionary call, intersects with the lives of the Romans. Paul has never met these Christians, but he wants to see them, on his way to his new mission field of Spain.

So what does this have to do with us? We get to these parts of Paul's letters, and we are not quite sure what to do with them. Yet we believe all of the Scriptures are useful for us.

How might we use these words? I believe it is appropriate for us to use them to ponder our passion, and our mission. The details will differ, because we are not Paul, and we are not the Romans. But as we sense Paul's passion, and as we read of his mission, we who believe the same gospel, are called to carefully consider, the place of our passion, and how we share in this mission, to this generation.

Let's start with OUR PASSION.

As I just said, we are not Paul. We are all called to different stations in life. Yet Paul's passion serves as an excellent example for us.

What is this passion all about? It is a passion for boasting, and a passion for blessing.

A PASSION FOR BOASTING.

A passion for boasting? Yes! If it is the right kind of boasting!

In verses 14 and 15, Paul commends the Romans. He has not even met them, yet he has written boldly to them, and he is confident about them.

Then in verse 16, Paul begins to describe his call. He is a minister to the Gentiles. He is a Jew, but God has led him to offer the gospel to non-Jews.

Now we get to his passion, in verses 17 and 18:

"Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done..."

"Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus." The word translated "glory" can also be translated "boast." When you boast, you are exalting something. You are promoting something. You are so pleased about it, that you must speak of it.

It is like the sports fan, wearing the shirt or hat or anything else which promotes his favorite team. When you do that, you want people to know this about you, even if they know nothing else: this is my team.

Paul boasts in Christ Jesus. All he wants to talk about, is what Jesus has done, through the Holy Spirit, in bringing Gentiles to salvation and new life. If people know nothing else about him, he wants them to know this: his Savior and Lord is Jesus Christ! This is his passion - a passion for boasting.

What about you and me? What about us?

Yes, this starts with you and me as individuals. I asked you last week, and I ask you again: as you rise in the morning, and as you walk through the day, do you have a passion for showing Jesus to people, with the life you live and the words you speak? Do you think about it? Do you pray about it? As you live before others, do you want to show others what it means to "walk in the dust" of Jesus?

You will boast about the Indianapolis Colts, or the Richmond Red Devils, or the Indiana Hoosiers. But will you boast about Jesus?

Yet with these words, we must also think of our community. As a church, do we have a proper passion for the people we have sent to boast about Jesus in these foreign lands?

Ask the question this way. Is missions a part of what the church is about, or is missions the heart of what the church is about?

It is more than just a part. It is the heart of our mission as a church, to boast about Jesus as individuals, and as a church, through our support of others who have been called to boast in faraway places.

Our passion must be a passion for boasting. Our passion must be A PASSION FOR BLESSING.

Let's go back to Paul's story. Starting in verse 20, Paul describes his passion for going to Spain.

Why Spain? Paul wants to go where the gospel has not been preached. Paul and others have boasted about Jesus in all sorts of places, but no one ever gone to Spain.

On the way to Spain, Paul wants to meet the Roman Christians.

You might say, "Why? If Paul has such a passion for boasting, he should see that these Romans are already Christians, and he ought to forget about them and get on the road to Spain!"

But Paul's gospel passion is not just for reaching the lost. It is for blessing the "found."

What kind of blessing is this?

It is first, the blessing of generosity.

Before Paul goes to Spain, and before Paul goes to Rome on the way to Spain, he wants to go to Jerusalem. As we read about in some of his other letters, he has been collecting a gift from other churches to deliver to the church in Jerusalem.

Those Christians are poor. The church there may be suffering beneath persecution. Yet Paul has a passion for generously blessing them.

This will be risky.

The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem may seek to harm Paul. That's why he writes in verse 32 about being rescued from unbelievers.

The Jewish Christians, who still have a shaky relationship with other, non-Jewish Christians, may not be pleased about the gift. That's why Paul writes in verse 32 about his desire that his "service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there..."

But Paul sees an opportunity for blessing. He realizes that this generous gift will relieve the physical burdens of the Jerusalem Christians, and it could serve to spiritually unite these very different believers, from very different parts of the world.

So he will risk it. As part of his mission, he will offer a blessing of generosity.

Yet Paul's passion for blessing is also a passion for the blessing of fellowship.

Before he goes to Spain, and after he goes to Jerusalem, Paul wants to "enjoy the company" of the Romans for a while. Paul has heard of them, so now he wants to hear from them, and he wants them to hear more from him. If they need to grow, he may correct them. If they need to stand strong in hard times, he may encourage them.

He sums it all up in verse 29: "I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ."

Paul does not just want to boast to unbelievers about Jesus. He wants to bless believers, with generosity and fellowship, in the name of Jesus.

That is part of the work of missions. In recent generations, attitudes about missions have changed. It used to be, "The missionaries should enter that situation, and take charge." Now it is, "The missionaries are there to come alongside believers in these places, so they can help." That help might be the help of generosity, or the help of fellowship. But along with a passion for boasting, the call of missions is to have a passion for blessing.

This is important for us, as we think about helping our missionaries, and as we think about our passions. We feel this tension, don't we?

Some say, "Just boast of Jesus! Just tell others about Jesus!"

Others say, "Blessing other believers is just as important!"

Who is right? In different situations and different seasons, both are important. We must have a passion for boasting about Jesus to unbelievers. Yet we must also have a passion for blessing other believers, with whatever generous gifts we may have, and whatever loving fellowship we can offer.

I think of David and Terri Wegener, who serve in Zambia. Beth Ann and I visited with them recently.

David teaches at a theological college in Zambia. He tries to find special young men. He blesses them with fellowship, and he blesses them by seeking generous giving from U.S. churches, so these men can continue to be trained for ministry.

Why? So God will use these young men to bring unbelievers to Jesus, in their nations. They can reach people David could never reach.

It's not either. It's not "a passion for boasting" or "a passion for blessing." It's both.

It's you and me, and it's the missionaries we support. It is our gospel passion, and it is their gospel passion, because it was Paul's gospel passion.

Is it your passion? Is it our passion? Earlier this year, we presented a new vision/purpose statement for our community that calls for us to develop a culture of making disciples and teaching disciples. We do this when we have a passion for ourselves to make and teach disciples, and a passion for the people we support in faraway lands, who are making and teaching disciples.

Yet Paul's words call us not just to a certain passion. They call us to a certain mission. What is OUR MISSION?

Once again, it will not be precisely the same as Paul's. We must not say, "Paul was a missionary in faraway lands, so you must be just like Paul." Each person has a different calling.

Yet we are not just called to share Paul's passion. We are also called to share in Paul's mission. His mission is our mission.

Jean Azbell's mission, is our mission. The Brauers' mission, is our mission. The Eastmans' mission, is our mission. Ruth Martinez' mission, is our mission. The Nachtergaele's mission, is our mission. The Pfeils' mission, is our mission. The Wegener's mission, is our mission.

Two years ago, at the start of Bible School, I tried to sum this up with an acrostic: "SHARE." With our passion for boasting and blessing, we are all called to "share" in the mission of giving the gospel to the nations.

S - we send missionaries.

H - we help missionaries.

A - we ask for God's grace, for our missionaries.

R - we rejoice with our missionaries.

E - we enter into missions service, if God calls us to this.

Paul's words reveal how we share. We share from our wealth, and we share in this struggle.

WE SHARE FROM OUR WEALTH.

In verse 24, as Paul writes of his desire to go to Spain, he says, "I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey..."

Paul is probably writing here about financial assistance. As we read of his life in the New Testament, we see him making tents to provide for his material needs, but we also see him receiving support from churches.

With this financial, physical, material assistance, Paul can continue on to Spain, where he can boast and bless.

That is what we do with the individuals and couples in these seven foreign countries. We assist them, so they may boast and bless, without needing to earn the money they need to live.

As we do this regularly, in our budget, we are fulfilling the "S" (sending) part of the acrostic. We tell these missionaries how much we will be helping them, and we keep that promise, as we send checks to the missions agencies that oversee them.

We also do this periodically. We fulfill the "H" part of that acrostic, as we help our missionaries with unexpected needs.

Sometimes this takes the form of "special needs" giving from our budget. The Missions Committee receives requests for help, and while some of special needs giving goes to one-time gifts for other missionaries and missions, we will also use those funds for the specific needs for our missionaries.

Sometimes this periodic "helping" comes through our mission cans. I know it's hard to remember them! But as we give through them, the church sends special gifts to the missionaries. Several times, I have received emails from our missionaries, telling me that our mission can gift arrived at a time of need.

We send and we help, with financial gifts that provide for the material and physical needs of these missionaries, so they may boast and bless.

I hope that can continue. As you know, we are in a budget crisis. One of the greatest heartbreaks for me in this, is the prospect of telling one or more of our missionaries, that we cannot send and help them anymore.

This would be especially difficult now, because the value of the dollar has plunged in recent years, and some of our missionaries are living on as much as one-third less income, than they did a few years ago. I wish I could inform them of an increase, not a decrease or even a cutoff. But I can only do it, when we all have a passion for boasting and blessing, and share, as a church, from our wealth.

We share from our wealth, and **WE SHARE IN THIS STRUGGLE.**

Verse 30: "I urge you brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ, and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me." As we have seen, the trip to Jerusalem was risky for Paul. The rest of the story is that risk became reality, as Paul was arrested, sent to Rome, and later executed.

But as Paul writes, the struggle is on. He knows that he cannot do any boasting, or any blessing, on his own. He needs God's people, who share his passion, to share in this struggle.

We are not just a money machine for missionaries. We are their spiritual partners in ministry. We are such partners, as we pray. This is the "asking" portion of that acrostic.

But this is not just bland, lifeless prayer. This is a struggle. The word here was used to describe athletic contests, or even military battles.

Do you see the point? When we make prayer, we are making war! As a body, and as individuals, we are to be prayer warriors for missionaries. We stand against the gates of hell, and stand before the gates of heaven, with our prayers, on their behalf.

I confess that I have failed to lead us well in this area. In recent days, God has convinced and convicted me that as a church, we are weak in engaging in gathered, kingdom-focused prayer. We are doers. We want results.

Our prayers for missionaries don't fit that model. So we grow weary, and we fail to struggle as we should, as co-warriors with these warriors.

I would like to see that change. I will be asking our elders to discuss how to change that. But for now, I offer you this question: do you pray for these brothers and sisters in these seven countries?

You say, "I don't know what to pray for!" We have recent newsletters posted on the entryway bulletin boards. We always include a "missionary of the month" in our e-mail newsletter. We are glad to forward email letters from missionaries, as we receive them.

As well, I would offer you this idea: pray the Scriptures. As you pray, pray the words of God back to him, for the sake of our missionaries. It is part of sharing in the struggle.

Yet we also share in this struggle, not just as we pray, but as we spend time with our missionaries. This is the "R" in "SHARE" - rejoicing.

Paul wants to be with the Romans, as he writes in verse 32, so that together, they may both be refreshed.

Sometimes we have the opportunity to meet with our missionaries. When they come to us, we should make it our highest priority, to be with them. It is our duty and delight to surround them with the blessing of fellowship.

We weep with them. We rejoice with them. We let them know they are not alone. We are not often with them in body, but we are always with them in spirit, for their passion is our passion, their mission is our mission, and their struggle is our struggle.

John Piper writes,

"...during wartime even the millions of civilians love to get news from the front lines. They love to hear of the triumphs of the troops. They dream about the day when war will be no more.

"So it is with Christians. All of us should dream about this. We should love to hear how the advance of King Jesus is faring."

And sometimes, we will not just send, help, ask or rejoice, but we will enter with them.

Our Missions Committee has considered the question of how we can share in the ministry of these missionaries, and we have decided that it is good for us to share, by sometimes having people do the last part of the acrostic - E. We want to provide opportunities for our people to enter into those ministries, with our missionaries, for a season.

This is not vacation. This is not getting in the way. This is the act of coming alongside these men and women, and entering their world, so that we might help in any way possible.

Maybe this is one of our pastors, going to give counsel and encouragement. Maybe this is some of you, coming with us, to help in particular ways.

We have talked about Germany, although that will need to wait another year. We are talking about Belgium. We have already done this in Ireland. What about Mexico, or even the Philippines, Japan, or Zambia? How can we enter? How might God call you to enter?

Will your reflex be to say, "No! Let somebody else enter!" Or will you say and pray, "Lord, I share your passion. I want to share in your mission. How might I enter into the lives of our missionaries? Or how might I enter into the world of some other mission, closer to home, even next summer?"

Parents and grandparents, I speak especially to you. What greater joy could there be, than to know that your children are walking in the truth, as they enter missionary service for a season now, and even a lifetime later?

On June 28, 1809, a young man named Adoniram Judson applied to become a missionary. The same day, he met a young woman named Ann, and Adoniram was soon in love.

He wrote these words to Ann's father:

"I have now to ask, whether you can consent to part with your daughter early next spring, to see her no more in this world;

"...whether you can consent to her departure, and her subjection to the hardships and sufferings of missionary life;

"...whether you can consent to her exposure to the dangers of the ocean, to the fatal influence of the southern climate of India; to every kind of want and distress; to degradation, insult, persecution, and perhaps a violent death.

"Can you consent to all this, for the sake of him who left his heavenly home, and died for her and for you; for the sake of perishing, immortal souls; for the sake of Zion, and the glory of God?"

"Can you consent to all this, in hope of soon meeting your daughter in the world of glory, with the crown of righteousness, brightened with the acclamations of praise which shall redound to her Savior from heathens saved, through her means, from eternal woe and despair?"

Ann's father did consent. Adoniram and Ann both went, and ultimately gave their lives, for the One who gave them life.

Do those words stir passion in you? Maybe God won't call you to live the life of Paul or Adoniram Judson. Maybe it will be your son or daughter. And maybe it won't even be so hard for them. The Judsons would be amazed with all the conveniences available for today's missionaries.

But is this our passion? For boasting, and for blessing?
Is this not our mission, as we send, help, ask, rejoice, and even enter?
How will God call you and yours, to share in this work?