

Bob Akroyd 5.3.21

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Preacher: Bob Akroyd

[0 : 0 0] And I feel if I had more time to prepare for tonight, I would have given you a shorter address. So I try not to keep you too long. But what I wanted to do to encourage you was to read a few passages from the Bible from Romans, famous letter, to read the very beginning of that letter and to read the very end of the letter.

Because the beginning and end are really important. We had a class this week on communication. And I was saying to the students that how you start and how you finish, how you start a speech or how you start a sermon or how you begin an essay and how you end an essay, those are often the most important places of any form of communication.

So we were looking at a famous speech, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, four score and seven years ago. Our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

That's not a bad start, is it? And then Lincoln closed a few moments later. He said that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom.

And that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth. So we have a good start and we have a good ending. The Apostle Paul gives us a good start to his letter because he has something to say to the people of Rome, to the Christians who are in Rome.

[1 : 3 0] But he has something to say to the nations, to everyone. Now, my experience is that people from Harris and people from Lewis have a way of getting all different kinds of places.

They travel near and far. And I'm sure throughout the world, there'll be associations and clubs and gatherings of people from the islands. Because, you know, you're a people that tend to travel, whether in the, you know, in ships that's shipping or in business or whatever it might be.

So there's no telling who I might be speaking to tonight and where you might end up. If you're young or not so young, Murdo was telling me that he's going to soon be in Liverpool.

So, you know, you guys get around. So Paul has something to say to this group that is gathered in this place called Rome. But he knows that his message is not just for that group, but it's for everyone.

So let me just read the first few verses of Romans, and then I'm going to read the last few verses in a few minutes. So Romans chapter 1, verse 1, Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures concerning his son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the son of God in power, according to the spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, 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, to all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints.

- [3 : 24] Grace to you and peace from God, from our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Including you. God has something to say to you, whoever you are, whatever you do, wherever you're from, wherever you're going.
- That's the remarkable thing about the Bible, is that it is a message for individual people, groups of people, all kinds of people, from all different places, all different backgrounds.
- So tonight, I'm sure I'm speaking to folks who are familiar with the Bible, you've heard the Bible preached, you've read the Bible, but I want just to remind us that God is speaking to us, but also that God is speaking through us.
- That God has something to say to us, and God has something to say through us. So, first of all, the Apostle Paul is telling us something about his message.
- And he says that his message can be summarized in this magnificent word, gospel. Good news. That this is gospel concerning Jesus.
- [4 : 35] Jesus, Jesus, who was a human being, he was descended from David. Jesus, who was declared to be the Son of God with power, by his resurrection from the dead.
- Now, my great love, really, I love theology, but my real love and passion is history. And I find that so many great illustrations from the pages of history just leap off the page when I read them.
- And I've never been there. I have been to China, but I've never been to that part of China. I've been to Southeast China. But if you were to journey to the far southwest of China, remote area, in a province called Yunnan, in a county called Weishi, you'll see a marker.
- And this marker is in three different languages. It's written in English. It's written in Chinese, Mandarin. And it's written in the Lisu script. It's a script that's spoken by one of the indigenous minority groups within China, the Lisu people.
- And the plaque reads this, in loving memory, James O. Fraser, 1886 to 1938. How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.
- [5 : 53] With deepest love, remember you always, the Lisu Church. Now, this is a strange place to go in North Harris or from the dining room of Edinburgh.
- But in this small place, in this remote part of China, over 100 years ago, an Englishman with a Scottish name, James O. Fraser, felt the call of God to go.
- And he went to this remote part of China to bring the good news, the gospel, to the people of China. But when he got there, not only did the people, the Chinese people, need to hear the gospel, but he met this strange group of people.
- They had strange customs. They had a different language. They had strange clothes. They lived in the mountains. And the first thing that he learned was that these were the Lisu people, and there was no known Christian among them.
- Nobody had ever heard of Jesus. Nobody had ever spoken to them of Jesus. They had no scriptures in their own language. In fact, there was no written, they had no written language at all.
- [6 : 58] They didn't have an alphabet. They didn't have a script. But James Fraser felt a call to these people. He wanted to bring the good news. And he said the first thing he did was he looked at the speeches in the book of Acts.
- And he said, if I'm going to preach the gospel, I need to know what the gospel is. And if you're not a Christian tonight, I'm sure many of us gather tonight are Christians, but if you're not yet a Christian, you need to know that the good news concerning Jesus is comprised of certain truths.
- And he said this. There were really only four elements to a gospel proclamation. He said the first was the crucifixion of Jesus. No other explanation given, just that Jesus was crucified.

He then went on to say the resurrection of Jesus Christ, that the gospel was never preached without this being brought in. He then went on to say that there was an exhortation of people to repent, to turn from their sins, and a promise given that all who believed in Jesus would have their sins forgiven and would receive eternal life.

But what I wanted to highlight from Fraser was this, that he highlighted the resurrection, the absolute importance that Jesus was raised from the dead. You see, Paul has a message of good news, a powerful message.

[8 : 19] And he says the foundation of that power is that Jesus was raised. You see, Jesus died. He died to pay a price.

He died to settle in debt. He lived a perfect life. He died a sacrificial death. But he was raised triumphant. Triumphant over death, triumphant over sin, and triumphant over evil.

So the resurrection is a statement of the power of God. And maybe tonight, you might feel weak, and you might feel discouraged, and you might feel disheartened.

You might just simply feel confused. And there's much to be confused about. But Paul wants his audience from the very beginning to remember these words, gospel, power, resurrection.

He then talks about obedience of faith, that we are to obey the gospel. Now, oftentimes, we are reminded that the gospel is an invitation for God to love the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes will not perish but have everlasting life.

[9 : 30] And the gospel is an invitation. The gospel is also a command, a command that must be obeyed, a command that we have responsibility to obey and to respond to.

And Paul says that he has something to say to the audience in Rome, and he has something to say to the nations, to all people. So as an American living in Scotland, based in Edinburgh, speaking to folks who are based in Harris, in Lewis, in Inverness, in different places, but primarily in Harris, God has a message for all nations and a message for all people.

And it's a powerful message that changes people's lives from the inside out. So the message of the gospel is not, what can you do?

Or what can I do? Or even, what can we do? But the message of the gospel is, what has God done? What has Jesus done? And you see, when we ask the question that way, if it was about, well, what can you do for Jesus?

Well, not that much. I'm not that strong. I'm not that articulate. I'm not that confident. I'm not. And we could all list many different excuses. But when we ask the question, what can Jesus do for you?

[10 : 52] What can Jesus do for me? What has Jesus done? That's a completely different question with a completely different answer. You see, the gospel is a powerful message. That's why Paul goes on in verse 16 of chapter 1.

And he says, I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

The power of God. You see, God is so powerful that he can make something out of nothing. God is so powerful that he can sustain all things. So the measure of God's power is raising his son from the dead.

The measure of God's power is creating something from nothing, sustaining all things, and bringing all things to his intended destination.

The power of God. The good news of Jesus. And God is calling you and I to obey and to trust, to receive, and to share.

[11 : 52] I told you about a plaque that you might never see in southwest China. But I'll tell you about a plaque that you might very well see. It's not in southwest China, but it's in the heart of London, in the city of London.

And if you ever do go to London, I hope that you might visit the church in the city of London. It's called London City Presbyterian Church. It's a free church. I happen now to be the interim moderator, so we are looking for a new minister.

But right outside the church, there's a plaque. I love reading plaques. And the plaque says this. The probable site where on May the 24th, 1738, John Wesley felt his heart strangely warmed.

You see, John Wesley that night went to a prayer meeting. Didn't really want to go. And sometimes, if we're honest, we go to meetings that we don't really want to go to. Sometimes we go to church and we don't really want to go.

Sometimes we go to meetings and we're not really keen, but we go. John Wesley went. And at that meeting, somebody was reading the preface.

[12 : 57] Martin Luther wrote a commentary on the Book of Romans. And somebody was reading from that commentary, not even reading from the Bible. But as he heard of this powerful change that takes place through the gospel, the power of God, the righteousness of God, the righteousness that is by faith from first to last, Wesley felt that his heart was strangely moved.

And from that point forward, he said, the world is now my parish. You see, you never know who might be listening. You never know who might be there.

You never know what might happen next. And we might all conclude, we might say, well, that's interesting. But that's certainly not me. My best years are behind me.

The days when I could do things have long since passed. And maybe that's true. But I would encourage you, if you're a Christian, to be praying.

To be praying for the gospel to go forth with power. And that people would not just hear, but hear and respond. That not only would they agree with their minds, but that their hearts would be warmed.

[14 : 08] Because you see, the gospel has the ability of changing people from the inside out. Religion attempts to change people from the outside in, and it never works. But only the gospel changes people from the inside.

And for those of you who are young, by young, I mean under 54, because that's now the measure of old and young. But if you're a young person, maybe ask yourself, what is God calling you to do and calling you to be?

If he's calling you to teach, if he's calling you to be a medical professional, if he's calling you to some form of service, there's no telling what he might do in your life.

There's no telling what he might do through your life. And though you might come from a small place, God can take people who come from small places and achieve great things.

Not because they're great or they're from a great place, but because he's a great God with a great gospel concerning his son who is worthy of great praise.

[15 : 14] So Paul begins with this theme of power and of gospel and of faith. And as he comes to the end of Romans, Romans chapter 16 at the very end, he concludes with a word of praise or doxology.

And you might have heard this. This is one of the many doxologies that are used or that you can use this as a benediction. At Romans chapter 16, 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 hidden for long ages, but now has been disclosed.

And through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal goal, to bring about the obedience of faith to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ.

Amen. When I lived in Japan, I lived in Japan before I came to Scotland. And one of my job there was to teach and I was teaching English. And when you're teaching English, you're trying to explain the different parts of speech and how the language is used.

And pronouns are difficult because sometimes you have pronouns as I and me, but other times you have pronouns that are possessive, like my and your and our.

[16 : 42] You see, Paul uses this possessive pronoun very importantly here. You see, when David wrote that wonderful psalm, Psalm 23, he said, the Lord is my shepherd.

Is the Lord your shepherd? Is the gospel your gospel? Because Paul says, this good news is mine. This Jesus is mine.

His life, his death, his resurrection, his good news is my good news. And when we take to heart what he has done and we make it personal, this personal message becomes a powerful message.

And Paul is confident that his audience can not only be changed, they can be sustained and they can be equipped and they can be enabled and they can go forth.

You see, Paul's time will soon come to an end, but he wants to pass on this message to the next generation. So you're celebrating three years in your building.

[17 : 47] And sadly, we can't be in your building tonight, but we will be. We will soon be together again. Much to celebrate. God has been good. But there's no telling what God can do with your life, in your life, and through your life.

John Wesley went reluctantly to that prayer meeting. God used him as a great instrument of the gospel. One of the favorite places that Wesley went to was Newcastle.

Newcastle was a rough place. It might be a rough place still. I've not been to Newcastle, so I don't want to impugn a place that I've never been to. But he said he came to Newcastle one time, and this was his reaction.

He said, we came to Newcastle about six. And after a short refreshment, walked into the town. I was surprised. So much drunkenness, cursing and swearing, even from the mouths of little children.

Do I never remember to have seen and heard before, in so small a compass of time? Surely this place is right for him, who came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

[18 : 58] So he comes into the town of a city of Newcastle, and he's confronted with sin. I don't know about you, but there are sinners all over the place.

Men and women, and young and old, they don't know Jesus, they don't know the gospel, and they behave as men and women, young and old, who don't know Jesus and don't know the gospel. And Wesley says to himself, I'm in exactly the right place.

This is exactly the right audience. These are not righteous people. These are not good people who need to be better. These are sinners who need to be saved. And you see, that's what the gospel is.

The gospel is the good news of salvation that is found not in ourselves, but in Jesus. And you see, the John Wesley that went reluctantly to that meeting those many years ago, he looked the part.

He had the outside of a Christian, but he knew that something was missing. His heart was not warm. His heart had not been changed. But once his heart was changed, he was used by God to bring good news to other people.

[20 : 08] And I hope, and I pray, that in this, now your fourth year in your building, that this will be a year that God will use you, whoever you are, wherever you are, whatever you do.

You might say to yourself, there are far better people, far brighter, far more articulate, far more intelligent. I'll agree with you, it's impolite to disagree. But God has called you.

If you have faith in Jesus, he has called you to serve him. And God can demonstrate his power in weak people like us. He can demonstrate his wisdom in people like us who often get it wrong.

And he can demonstrate that he is significant by working in the lives of people like us who are otherwise insignificant. But I want to say this.

If you're a Christian tonight, one thing is for sure. You are no longer ordinary. You are extraordinary. Because you have faith in an extraordinary Savior, which is based upon an extraordinary gospel.

[21 : 16] One who died and one who was raised in power. There's nothing ordinary about that. And there's nothing ordinary about you. I began with that plaque in southwest China, James O. Fraser.

James O. Fraser began his ministry when zero Lisu people had heard the gospel, let alone responded to the gospel. Today, more than 50% of the Lisu people are evangelical Christians.

They're in Thailand. They're in Burma. They're in China. They're in India. Wherever they go, they have brought the gospel with them.

That's the power of the gospel, to change lives, to transform communities, to change nations. Paul has a message for the nations.

And Paul says this message is delivered by ordinary people serving a God who is extraordinary. One time, Fraser was writing home.

[22 : 20] And he realized that he needed help. And maybe you think, I can't go. And my days of speaking are gone. Or my days of serving might be behind me. But I'm going to say to you this.

One thing is for sure. We can all pray. Fraser wrote his partners in prayer. He said, I used to think that prayer should have the first place and teaching the second.

I now feel that it would be truer to give prayer the first, second, and third place and teaching the fourth. So pray for your minister every Sunday that he preaches.

Pray for your congregation. Pray for those who are going in the name of Jesus to the ends of the earth. Pray for those that are serving Jesus in their local communities. Pray for those who are representing Jesus in the healthcare profession and the education profession who are simply serving Jesus wherever he has called them.

One thing is for sure, you can pray. And after you pray, keep praying. And after you keep praying, keep praying some more. Because when you pray, you are asking the God who has all power to demonstrate his power in the midst of our weakness and to show forth the glory of Jesus.

[23 : 35] And when the glory of Jesus is seen and believed, when the gospel is heard and responded to, watch out. God is able to do great and wonderful things through people like you and me.

So congratulations on this, your third anniversary. And I pray that God would give you many more anniversaries and that you would have great cause to give praise and thanks to our God for his gospel concerning his son who was raised in power, declared to be the son of God, Jesus Christ.

God bless you all. Let me pray. Father, thank you for each one of us gathered. Thank you for this celebration. Thank you for your people, whether they are in Harris or Lewis, whether they are in the mainland, whether they are to the ends of the earth.

We thank you that we have a shared faith, a shared gospel, a shared savior. So comfort us, encourage us, strengthen us and equip us. And may we be pleased to serve the living God.

Help us to pray. Help us to speak. Help us to serve. And in all things, help us to honor Jesus. For it's in his name we pray. Amen.