

Motives for Missions

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For the past few weeks in our study of Romans we've been in chapter 15 where Paul says quite a bit about his missionary vision and his travel plans. So we've been learning about Paul's missionary zeal. We know from his letters that he was a very passionate man. He was passionate about the Gospel. He was passionate about the deep truths that undergird and are connected with the Gospel message. And he was very passionate to take this Good News to those who had never heard it.

The question I want to ask this morning is: What motivated Paul? What should motivate us? I want to try to get inside of Paul's mind, inside of his being, to understand where this missionary passion came from.

Let's first remember how he expresses this zeal in Romans 15.

The sermon this morning will draw on various texts. I want to look at the broader scope of Scripture and ask what are motives for missions. There are 4 headings I came up with. I'm sure there are others that could be given. But here are 4 things that should be part of our Christian understanding that will fuel our excitement about missions.

Some of these I'll spend more time on. Some will be pretty brief. My aim and hope is that these points will inspire us and encourage us. The point is not to make us feel guilty for what we're not doing (although the Holy Spirit may want to convict our hearts on certain things, and that may be needed). But my main objective is to put before us biblical truth that I hope will stir up a joyful passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ and a joyful desire to share this Gospel with others, both near and far.

Identity and Calling

The first thing to realize is that an interest in evangelism and missions is part of our identity and calling as Christians. I had some good conversations on Tuesday about this passage, with the Tuesday morning men's Bible study and later with Andrew and Jake. This point came up as we talked about motives for missions. In one sense, external motivations for missions are secondary, because Gospel outreach is part of who we are as Christians. We've been given something that we can't NOT give away.

It's how Paul put it in Romans 1:14-15.

“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 1:14–15, ESV)

He says that he is under obligation. Literally, the Greek reads, “I am a debtor.” The question is, How is he a debtor? How did he get into debt, and how can he get out of debt? Well, he's not a debtor in the sense that he borrowed something and owes it back. There's another kind of debt, and that's when someone gives you something to pass along to someone else.

That's what Paul is saying. There is something that has been entrusted to him, and it is intended for the nations. And what is this something? It is the gospel. The gospel message had been entrusted to Paul, as an apostle specifically called to the Gentiles. And so he has this obligation to preach the gospel to the Gentiles.

When we use words like debtor and obligation, those may not sound very good to us. It may sound like this is just a burden and a duty. But then in verse 15 he says that he is *eager* to preach the gospel in Rome. Paul understood his obligation, but it was not merely an obligation. It was something he was passionate about, and something he saw as a great privilege.

In Ephesians 3:8 he refers to it as a grace that was given to him. “To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.” Yes, it was an obligation which Paul felt very strongly. And it was also something he recognized as a gift from God.

We, too, should see that God has entrusted us with this good news, and He doesn't intend for us to just sit on it, or bury it. He wants us to tell others about it. The message has to go forth to the nations. It has to go forth to the folks in our neighborhoods and in the workplace and in the schools and in our families and around the world.

As I reflected on this further this week, it occurred to me that this is another illustration of the relationship between the indicative and the imperative in the Christian life. This is a fascinating and encouraging reality of the Christian faith. Christianity is not just another religion of rules. There are rules. There are commands from God which we are obligated to obey. But what comes before that, what precedes that, is something that God does for us. So the indicative statements, the statements of fact about what God has done for His people, is foundational. And then based on our identity in Christ, what He has done for us, we are then told how we should live and act in light of that identity.

In Acts 1:8 Jesus tells His disciples, *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my*

witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”” (Acts 1:8, ESV)

There’s power from the Holy Spirit, and then there’s the declaration and command that we are to be witnesses. Being witnesses is part of our identity as disciples of Jesus. He has saved us. He has changed us. And our lives will be a testimony to His greatness and grace. We’re not perfect. But we’re different than we were. And we have a story to tell of what He has done for us.

As Peter and John said to the authorities who were trying to silence them, “we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.” (Acts 4:20). Being a witness is not just something we do, it’s part of who we are. Something has happened to us, and we can’t help but give evidence of that, in word and deed.

So then when we read the Great Commission of Matthew 28, we have to realize that it’s not a mere duty. It’s not something we are to pursue in our own strength. It’s certainly not something that is going to earn us a right standing before God. Only by God’s grace can we have a relationship with Him.

Notice, even in the Great Commission itself, how Jesus sandwiches the command between promises. So the imperative is there—the command to make disciples—and it’s preceded and followed by promises from King Jesus.

“And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”” (Matthew 28:18–20, ESV)

Paul’s personal calling had such an impact on his entire ministry. God called him to a specific focus, and Paul remained riveted on that calling throughout the rest of his life. Acts 9 records the radical conversion of the Apostle Paul. The chapter begins with him “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord . . .” By the middle of that same chapter, he is proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues. And then he’s no longer the one persecuting Christians. Instead he is a Christian who is being persecuted.

Later in Acts when Paul describes his conversion, he recalls Jesus’ words to him, that Jesus had specifically commissioned him to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. (Acts 26:16–18)

Paul vividly remembered that calling upon his life. Jesus commissioned Paul as an apostle to the Gentiles, to the nations. He was to venture out to the non-Jewish people groups, telling them about the Messiah. That’s exactly what Paul did. He

evangelized and planted churches, and then he moved on to other places where Christ had not yet been named.

Not every one of us is going to have this same kind of calling on our lives. Not many will. But all Christians do have an identity in Christ and a calling to share the Gospel with others.

So I encourage you to reflect on your identity in Christ. Meditate on the great mercy you have been shown. Contemplate your life as it was apart from Christ, what your life would be today if Christ had not saved you. You have a story to tell. You are a witness. So be a witness.

In terms of calling, in terms of where our witnessing activities will be localized, that's going to be different for each of us. Some of us must go to places in the world where this is no Gospel witness. Others of us must stay right where we are. God will be faithful to guide each of us.

Love for People

One of the things God does in us when He saves us is gives us a supernatural love for other people. And this love for others is another factor in stoking the flames of our missionary zeal.

We hear Paul's love for his kinsmen in Romans 9:1-3

"I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit— that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh." (Romans 9:1–3, ESV)

Also in Romans 10:1

"Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved." (Romans 10:1, ESV)

Do we have that kind of broken-hearted love for others? Do we truly grieve over the fact that people we know are going to hell if they don't repent of their sins and trust in Jesus?

On the Gospel Coalition website I came across a short video that shared an evangelism story. A man named Jeremy shared about his friendship with a teenager named Shane. God has not yet saved Shane, but Jeremy prays for Shane and talks to Shane about God's love and justice and mercy. As Jeremy shared in this little video, he made the statement that we should love people, not evangelism. And I think that's an important point. It's a convicting point. Our objective in evangelism and missions is not just so we can check off a box on our Christian to-do list. There

should be a love for others that overflows with Gospel kindness and Gospel proclamation. Evangelism and missions is not just a task. It's a relational investment.

Heaven and Hell

Next, I want to talk some about heaven and hell. This is related to our love for others, because we should understand that those whom we love are going to spend eternity either in heaven or hell. Therefore out of love for them we hope and pray that they will trust Jesus and be forgiven, so that they will be rescued from the punishment of hell and instead inherit the undeserved gift of heaven.

In various ways, the reality of an eternal hell is challenged by many. Interestingly, the reality of an eternal heaven is not hotly debated. I guess the assumption is that God owes heaven to us, and He would be unjust to send anyone to hell forever. That just seems too harsh. But when we understand the seriousness of sin and how offense it is to a holy God, we then understand that heaven is far more the shocking reality.

“This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering— since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.” (2 Thessalonians 1:5–10, ESV)

I bring this up in this sermon because the reality of hell stresses the importance and the gravity and the urgency of the missionary task. If we were universalists, and we believed that everyone is eventually going to be in heaven, what would the purpose of missions be? It's not a big deal, then, because nobody will end up in hell. Or if we were annihilationists, and believed that those who die apart from Christ simply cease to exist. That position could weaken the missionary cause.

We need to understand that when we talk about missions, we're not just talking about going various places to make people's

lives better, in some general sense. We're talking about the weighty and eternal realities of heaven and hell.

Please notice in this passage that hell is eternal. Verse 9 says, "They will suffer the punishment of ETERNAL destruction." This destruction, this ruining, will go on for ever and ever. It's not annihilation, meaning that the individuals cease to exist. It is eternal conscious torment.

Revelation 14:11 says, "And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name." The torment is never-ending. The language the Bible uses to describe hell couldn't be any stronger. It is going to be an infinitely great punishment.

We also see the fact that hell is eternal when it is contrasted with heaven. For instance, in Matthew 25:46, where Jesus contrasts the righteous ones who help the hungry and naked and sick and those in prison, and on the other hand, those who do not help. Jesus says, "And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." We will all live forever, some in heaven and some in hell. We all have an eternity of conscious existence before us. Hell is eternal just like heaven is eternal.

And notice how the passage in 2 Thessalonians describes the punishment of eternal destruction, in verse 9. "away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might." That will be the worst thing about hell. Everyone there will be absolutely cut off from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might. The best thing about heaven will be enjoying the presence of the Lord and delighting in the glory of his might. But those in hell will not be able to gaze upon the beauty of God's character and power and perfection. And apart from him there is nothing but misery and pain. The inhabitants of hell will experience eternal conscious torment.

Listen to how Jonathan Edwards vividly describes the punishment of hell in his famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

"It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of Almighty God one moment; but you must suffer it to all eternity. There will be no end to this exquisite horrible misery. When you look forward, you shall see a long for ever, a boundless duration before you, which will swallow up your thoughts, and amaze your soul; and you will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance, any end, any mitigation, any rest at all. You will know

certainly that you must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages, in wrestling and conflicting with this almighty merciless vengeance; and then when you have so done, when so many ages have actually been spent by you in this manner, you will know that all is but a point to what remains. So that your punishment will indeed be infinite. Oh, who can express what the state of a soul in such circumstances is! All that we can possibly say about it, gives but a very feeble, faint representation of it; it is inexpressible and inconceivable: For "*who knows the power of God's anger?*"

The reality of an eternal hell should be a wake-up call for all of us. If you are not trusting in Christ alone for the forgiveness of your sin, then you are on the path to hell. Don't put your hope in baptism or church attendance or any superficial thing. Christ alone can save. You must cast yourself in His mercy.

If you are already a believer, the reality of hell should help us realize the weight of evangelism and missions. We're not playing games here. Heaven and hell are at stake as we proclaim the Gospel to the unbelievers in our city and the unreached people groups of the world. This is weighty business.

C. S. Lewis has a poignant way of putting it. He wrote this: "There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors" (*The Weight of Glory*).

Think of that as you are interacting with co-workers this week. Every person you rub shoulders with is going to live forever, either in heaven or in hell.

The Glory of God

Finally, let's close with the reality that is really the overarching motivation for carrying the Good News of the Gospel to those who don't believe. And that is the glory of God.

Our purpose in evangelism and missions should be God's purpose. And what is God's ultimate purpose in His plans to bless all the families of the earth? Why does He want the Gospel to be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations? The answer that we find in the Bible is that God does everything He does, including missions, for His own glory. The goal of missions is God's glory. The reason He wants the Gospel to be proclaimed to all the nations is because He wants to receive praise and honor from every nation. He wants to be worshipped by

individuals from every ethnicity under the sun. He wants His Name to be famous in every tribe around this globe.

This was the purpose of Jesus' ministry here on earth, as Romans 15 says, "to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy." And this will be the purpose in His second coming, too! 2 Thessalonians 1:9 says, "when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed." And this will be the consuming passion of our lives in heaven for ever and ever. In John 17 Jesus prays for His followers, which includes us, and He says, "this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (v. 3). Then later in the chapter He asks, "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world" (v. 24). God's chief goal in everything He does is to bring glory and honor to His Name. He is passionately committed to spreading His fame and glory to all the nations. He wants to show off His beauty and power, and that goal drives everything He does.

How does that make you feel? That biblical truth can easily be a stumbling block because it makes it sound like God is arrogant and vain. Why is He so wrapped up in Himself? What about us? I thought He loved us? Your reaction to this truth will depend on your view of God and your view of love. If you resent the fact that God does everything to highlight his greatness, then it's because you haven't come to realize the joy there is to be found in beholding God's greatness. It's not an unloving thing for God to show off His power and beauty and command us to worship Him. On the contrary, that is the *most* loving thing He can do for us, because that's what will bring us everlasting joy. Seeing His glory, His greatness, is the only thing that will satisfy us and excite us and delight us forever and ever.

We tend to think of love in a self-focused way. If someone loves me, we think, that person will be focused on me, on my wants, on my pleasure, on my good qualities, etc. But that is empty love. Shallow and short-lived. A love that puts all the focus on me will NOT satisfy the deep longings I have in my heart. Because I'm all messed up and tainted and warped. And if I think I'm going to find lasting happiness in having God pat me on the back and tell me what a good person I am, then I'm deceived and sick. If God put all the focus on us, that would NOT be a loving thing for Him to do.

Instead, He loves us by letting us experience the great joy of focusing on Him and beholding His majesty. Do you see how precious this is? He doesn't leave us to ourselves, and He doesn't deprive us of the most exquisite pleasure in the universe, which is found in seeing His glory.

The ultimate purpose of missions is revealing the greatness of God for all the nations to see, and this is the most loving thing God can do for sinful humanity. He will display His glory among all the peoples of the world, and by doing so He will bless all the families of the earth and show them the highest form of love.

Revelation 5:9 is a beautiful picture of the saints in heaven joyfully worshipping the Lamb. "And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.'"

God has chosen the elect before the foundation of the world, and Jesus Christ purchased them with His blood, and they are from every tribe and language and people and nation. What a beautiful place heaven will be, as we worship the Lamb alongside our brothers and sisters from every ethnic group in God's creation. We will receive the joy of seeing God's glory and worshipping Him for who He is, and He will be glorified in our praises. This is the ultimate goal of missions.

So let us meditate on these truths, brothers and sisters. Let us think about our identity in Christ. He has made us to be reflections of His grace. We are witnesses. So let us witness. He has given us love for others. Let us truly love others by pointing them to Jesus. Let's remind ourselves of the seriousness of eternity, and the eternal realities of heaven and hell. And let us be consumed with a passion for God's glory. May the cry of our hearts be that of the Psalmist, which we heard read earlier in the service, from Psalm 67,

"Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you! Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth. Selah Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you!" (Psalm 67:3–5, ESV)