

## Leaving a Suitcase in Israel

How to Get to Heaven from Earth – Part I

Romans 10:1

### Introduction

It gives me great joy to invite you to take your Bible and turn to the book of Romans.

I received an e-mail, several days ago, from a radio listener who lives in Germany. It began, “Dear Stephan,” (that is his spelling, which is how they would pronounce it there), “It means a lot to me to know people who have a personal relationship with Christ and are called to proclaim His good news.”

He continued, “Here in Germany, we have a saying, ‘I left a suitcase in Berlin.’”

He explained, “It means that you have kept some sort of tie to that city or to the people who are living there, even though you have moved away.”

The note went on to explain that while he had moved away from his home town, he still had a suitcase there – meaning his heart was still, in some way, back with his family; his people; his roots.

I like that expression. Most, if not all of us can identify with that expression.

You have suitcases like that, don’t you? They are in special places where you once lived or worked. They are dotted around the countryside where you still have emotional ties. Perhaps it is the farm where you were raised; the school where you began your first teaching assignment; the apartment where you lived when you were first married; the church where you heard the gospel.

A couple came into the church visitor’s reception last week, explaining that they had just come from another state. They talked about their home church with glowing faces and how much they loved their

church and were so involved. Then, tears came to her eyes as she, all over again, realized what they had left.

I patted her on the arm and said, “It’s okay to grieve like that. My wife and I left a little church like that in Detroit, Michigan. The average age was sixty-five and the total attendance was about the same on a Sunday morning. I served there while in seminary. They ordained me into the ministry and let me preach once a month. They adopted us both and loved us. We will never forget that congregation. It’s okay to grieve.”

You are here today, but you have suitcases in other places.

Tomorrow morning, my wife and I are going to head north to college with our twin sons – pulling a U-Haul trailer stacked with boxes and clothes. We are going to deliver them to that hillside campus in Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania. Talk about emotional ties; talk about family! We are going to leave a lot there!

“I left a suitcase in Berlin.” What a great expression.

Throughout his entire ministry, from watching his movement around the Mediterranean world; from reading his letters filled with emotion and longing, it is obvious that the apostle Paul had left a suitcase in Israel. Even though he traveled the world and would eventually die a martyr’s death in Italy, his heart was never far away from his heritage; his roots; his native people.

### Qualities of Paul’s Character

Paul had left a suitcase in Israel! That could not be any clearer than in Romans, chapter 10, verse 1.

***Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation.***

Today, I simply want to unpack Paul's suitcase and bring out into the open three characteristics that made him so capable as a representative of Christ.

Frankly, the first several times I read this paragraph, I missed it as I hurried on to verse 2. But, let us stop and unpack this together and, in the process, discover why Paul was so effective; so winsome; so endearing, and at the same time, so infuriating to the Jewish people whom he dearly loved.

### **An inward passion – that explained Paul's resilience**

1. The first quality of character we unpack is an inward passion. That quality, let me add, explained Paul's resilience.

Paul writes in verse 1, "[This is] my heart's desire . . .".

Later in the verse, Paul tells us that his heart's desire is for the Jewish people to come to faith in Christ.

This is my "desire," or "eudokia" in the Greek, which could be translated, this is my "passion"; my "pleasure"; my "satisfaction". In other words, Paul is saying, "I would find nothing in the world more satisfying than to see my fellow Jews come to Jesus Christ."

That is absolutely remarkable when you consider what Paul has received from the hand of his fellow Jew. He has been stoned, beaten, forsaken, humiliated, ridiculed, hated, hunted, shunned, scorned, you name it!

By now, Paul should be carrying a grudge a mile wide. By now, he should be praying something like, "Lord, whatever Israel has coming to her, it's her own fault. Let her have it!"

Yet, two things are missing as you unpack Paul's suitcase – deep resentment and the desire for revenge. Surely they would be in there somewhere.

Paul was a man who was once greatly honored. His family was wealthy enough to send him to Jerusalem to be taught the law at the feet of Gamalliel. He grew up to become a special prosecutor for the Supreme Court of Israel, entrusted with the protection of Judaism from Christianity.

Now however, Paul is without any connections, without any personal fortune. In fact, he is so poor that he must finance his trips abroad by making tents. He has mortgaged everything he owns and everything he is for his great pleasure; that is, to see unbelievers surrender to the claims of Christ and worship Him as the true and living Lord.

Do you know anyone who is driven with an inner passion?

Did you watch the most recent Tour de France? There is something on the inside of Lance Armstrong that makes him want to ride a bike faster than anyone else in the world. The reason none of us are in the Tour de France is not because we do not own a good bicycle, but rather that we do not have that inner passion.

Do you know someone who is driven? Someone who has the kind of drive that causes a man to risk everything he is and has to start a business; that inner passion that moves a woman to enter the jaws of death to deliver a baby – and then want another one. Did she forget?

There is something on the inside that creates that kind of perseverance. The apostle Paul had this inward passion that created a special kind of resilience.

Listen to this incident, recorded in Acts, chapter 14, verses 19 through 22a, that occurred after Paul had preached in Lystra,

***But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead.***

***But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city. . . .***

(In other words, they stone Paul until they believe he is dead and drag him out of the city, but Paul is miraculously healed, and gets up and goes where? Back into Lystra! That would have been all I needed to say, "Well, men, it's obvious the Lord wants us in another town!" The record continues . . .),

***. . . The next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe.***

***After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch,***

*strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith . .*

Who would be better to encourage Christians to continue in the faith than one who is continuing in the faith?!

Paul's inward passion explained his resilience.

### **An upward pleading – that expressed Paul's confidence**

2. Let us unpack a second characteristic that made Paul so effective as the Lord's ambassador, which is an upward pleading that expressed his confidence.

Paul not only had an inward passion that explained his resilience, but an upward pleading that expressed his confidence.

Notice verse 1a of Romans, chapter 10, again,

*Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them . . .*

The antecedent to "them" is back in chapter 9, verse 31. Look at verses 31 and 32.

*but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone.*

In other words, Israel stumbled over Christ, the Cornerstone. That leads us to wonder why Paul would pray for them.

### **Why pray to God for unbelievers in light of divine election?**

After all we learned in chapter 9 of Romans – about God's sovereign election and Israel's unbelief – why pray for them? If we believe God is sovereign, and we do, then why pray at all for unbelievers?

### **God is sovereign**

- First, the only kind of God worth praying to is a God who is sovereign.

Prayer to any other kind of god is useless, because that god cannot really do anything about it.

Listen, the only kind of God who can answer prayer is a sovereign God!<sup>1</sup>

We intuitively know that if God is God, He is sovereign.

Even the liberal theologian, when driven to his knees, will pray that God heal his child from certain death. Why? Because he knows that the God worth praying to is sovereign over disease and even death.

Even unbelievers in this area prayed recently, "Please, Lord, allow the hurricane to not come near us."

Why? Because they intuitively know that the one true and living God is sovereign over nature.

So we pray to God for the souls of unbelievers because we know God is sovereign over the affairs of mankind.

### **God is the One who saves**

- Secondly, we pray for unbelievers not only because we know God is sovereign, but because we know God is the One who saves.

For those who are sharing their faith with unbelievers, this is incredibly reassuring. God is the One who does the work.

As I Corinthians, chapter 3, verse 6, tells us (paraphrased),

*We do the planting and the watering, but God gives the increase.*

In John, chapter 6, verse 44, Jesus said,

*No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.*

God alone does the drawing; God alone opens the eyes of the blind, who, as II Corinthians, chapter 4, verse 4a, tells us,

*. . . the god of this world has blinded the minds . . .*

Should you be prepared? Yes. But do not wait until you have all the answers. You do not have to fear missing a point; messing up an answer.

Paul is not praying for perfect answers, he is praying to God who *is* the answer. And he is praying that God will save his kinsmen in the flesh.

The word for "praying" in Romans, chapter 10, verse 1, is the strong Greek word "deesis," which is often translated, "to beg".

In Luke, chapter 5, verse 12, the same root word is used when a leper saw Jesus and fell on his face and begged Him saying,

***Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.***

And, in verse 13, the Lord said,

***. . . I am willing; be cleansed. . .***

Later, in Luke, chapter 9, verse 38, the father of a desperately ill little boy comes to Jesus and, the text says, he,

***. . . shouted, saying, “Teacher, I beg You to look at my son, for he is my only boy,”***

There is a sense of desperation in this word.

Paul is begging God on behalf of the unbeliever. Why? Because he knows only God is sovereign and only God can save.

So, why pray?

### **God has chosen to use us in His plan of salvation**

- Thirdly, we pray for unbelievers because our sovereign, saving Lord has chosen to use us in His plan of salvation.

That is the message of Romans, chapter 10. Look at verses 13 and 14.

***. . . Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved. How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?***

God has ordained the ends, but God has also ordained the means. And we are His means to an unbeliever’s saving end.

Nowhere does the scripture give us the responsibility to figure out whom God has chosen. However, God has given us the responsibility to preach and teach and testify and pray and exhort and plead with unbelievers. We are to proclaim the saving gospel to every person who will hear it, while begging, pleading with, praying to God to save them.

When God does save them, we are overjoyed that He alone saves and He alone is sovereign, and that He chose to use our prayer and our witness to fulfill His redemptive plan.

A week or so ago, I pulled up in front of a home for an appointment, knowing the husband was an unbeliever. He was a recent MBA graduate; sharp, gracious, inquisitive. I turned off my pick-up and for a brief moment, prayed in their driveway. What did I pray?

“Lord, give me the ability to so articulate the gospel that he will be utterly convinced by my presentation and believe?”

“Lord, help me to outwit him. (Let’s see, I’ve got my palm pilot with Quick Verse installed – just mention a word and I’m there, in thirteen different translations.)”

“I’m ready Lord. On your mark, get set, go!”

Not on your life. My prayer was more like this,

“Lord, if this is someone whom You are calling, would You please open his eyes tonight, and allow his ears to hear, and give me the privilege of being used by You to deliver the gospel and see him transferred from death unto life.”

After a few hours, our meeting was over. He had indeed claimed the grace of God by faith in Christ alone.

When I drove away in my truck around midnight that night, I was not shouting, “Yes! I did it!”

No, I prayed, “Oh God, thank you for letting me see You at work tonight. Thank you for letting me see the miracle of redemption.”

This is to be our inward passion; this is to be, like Paul, our upward pleading. And finally, let us unpack a third characteristic.

### **An outward purpose – that defined Paul’s relationships**

3. The last quality of character that we will unpack from Paul’s suitcase is his outward purpose that defined his relationships.

Everything about Paul ultimately revolved around the work of redemption. And I mean everything. He writes, in verse 1 of chapter 10 again,

***Brethren, my heart’s desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation.***

Didn’t the Jew need peace in their world? Yes.

Didn’t the Jew struggle to survive? Yes.

Wasn’t there injustice in their world? Yes.

What about those things?

Jesus Christ provides this perspective in Matthew, chapter 16, verse 26a,

***For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? . . .***

In other words, what good is world peace if you die and go to hell? What good is education and

prosperity and justice on earth if you die and spend eternity experiencing the justice of God in hell?

The church today seems to have forgotten this perspective. Our mission is redemptive; our purpose is not earth bound!

While we may do a lot of things to stay the decay of our world, the most important thing we can do is rescue people from the god of this world; to declare the gospel of Christ to everyone. This purpose should define our relationship with the world around us.

## **Principles – To Imitate Paul’s Character Qualities**

You might be saying, “Well, I’d like to be more like Paul, but I don’t know what to say at work, or at school. I’m a believer and I want my friends and co-workers and fellow students and faculty to come to faith in Christ, but where do I start?”

Let me give five principles for you to remember as you imitate the apostle Paul in his passion and pleading and purpose.

### **Be willing to embrace your calling as Christ’s representative**

1. First and foremost, be willing to embrace your calling as Christ’s representative.

In the office; on the campus, you’re it!

Do you own or manage a business? Here is a simple idea – play Christian music.

You might say, “But somebody might not like it.”

That is okay. If they like your business enough, they will overlook it.

I was in Chick-fil-A yesterday, eating and reading the newspaper. There was music playing over the loudspeakers and it finally dawned on me that the music I was listening to was Christian music by a contemporary Christian artist. There is a brave manager somewhere in the wings, saying, “I get to choose the music and I must seize this opportunity for Christ!”

### **Be willing to communicate only what you know**

2. Secondly, be willing to communicate only what you know.

When you are working next to a person who knows you are a Christian, they may ask a question that you do not know the answer to. That is okay. Remember, if God is at work, that tough question may only be masking their conviction and guilt.

I have found that often, when the heat gets a little too hot and the person realizes they are under the lamp, they will deflect to something else or ask a question that is really hard to answer.

Tell them you do not know the answer. There is nothing wrong with that. In fact, they may see in you something they are not willing to admit – that they do not have all the answers.

Then, you should go home and get the answer. Study, read, get out your concordance and Bible dictionary, get out your word studies and Bible encyclopedias – buy them if you do not have them – study! If you are still stumped, call the church.

Communicate only what you know.

### **Be willing to walk away from an argument you could easily win**

3. Thirdly, be willing to walk away from an argument you could easily win.

You do not want to win the argument, but lose the relationship.

Can you recall the many discussions Jesus Christ was in with scribes and Pharisees who wanted to argue – to pin Him down. He usually avoided being pinned by giving some great answer, but then left it alone. Every debate He was in, He could win!

On that day when Jesus was judged by the Sanhedrin and Pilate and Herod, He could have nailed them to the wall. But He did not, because His purpose was redemptive. He let them nail Him to the cross.

### **Be willing to compliment before you critique**

4. Fourthly, be willing to compliment before you critique.

In our pluralistic age, people believe in some very strange things.

It is like the time the apostle Paul spoke in Athens, a city with many statues to gods and goddesses along the roads and in and on every building. When he stood on that hillside to speak to the leaders and philosophers and citizens, he did not begin by saying, “You are all a bunch of idolaters.”

Paul began by saying, as recorded in Acts, chapter 17, verse 22b,

*. . . I observe that you are very religious in all respects.*

Then, having won them with his respect, he gave them the gospel.

I was in an ice cream store with my ten year old daughter, Charity, several days ago. It was a new part of town for us. The woman behind the ice cream counter was Pakistani; very kind and helpful. I introduced myself and my daughter, explaining what her name meant. It will be the first of many conversations, I trust. When we walked out, I asked Charity, "Did you see on the counter, a miniature gold elephant covered with tiny jewels, sitting in that glass case?"

She said, "Yes."

I then said to her, "That elephant – which I had seen many times in India – is an idol to her elephant god."

On our next visit, the approach would obviously not be to say, "What's that? You mean your god is an elephant? He has a trunk?"

Frankly, she could say to me, "You mean your God is an invisible Spirit, who had a Son on earth who was martyred on a cross?"

If I am to follow Paul's example, my next visit would find me asking, "You know, I think it's really courageous for you to tell all your customers about your god. Say, what is your god's name?"

The next visit, "Do you think he knows who you are?"

The next visit, "Do you believe he really cares about you?"

The next visit, "Do you mind if I tell you about my God?"

That leads me to the fifth principle.

### **Be willing to distribute truth, one piece at a time**

5. Fifthly, be willing to distribute truth, one piece at a time.

You do not have to back up the doctrinal truck and unload everything in one visit. Just because you are passionate does not mean you have to panic.

If God is calling this person through your witness, He has ordered the universe to make room and time for this one to hear the gospel.

### **Three keys to opening the heart of the unbeliever**

Let me add to this, at this point as we close, the overarching truth of Romans, chapter 10, verse 1, as it relates to effectively reaching the lost. I want to give three keys to opening the heart of the unbeliever.

1. *Pray* passionately for lost people.
2. *Pray passionately* for lost people.
3. *Pray passionately for* lost people.

While I am at it, let me give one more key to winning the lost.

4. *Pray passionately for lost people.*
- Then, fifthly, and this is critical,
5. *Pray passionately for lost people.*

As Paul says in Romans, chapter 10, verse 1, ***Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation.***

What passion! What pleading! What purpose!

No wonder the church is still reading and studying the words this man had to say two thousand years after he left his suitcase in Israel.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 8/15/2004 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 2004 Stephen Davey

All rights reserved.

---

<sup>i</sup> Alva J. McClain, Romans: The Gospel of God's Grace (Winona Lake, IN, BMH Books, 1973), p. 186.