

Three Perspectives . . . One Passion

Living With Forever In Mind – Part I

Romans 1:14-16a

Introduction

A gem dealer was strolling along the aisles of the Tucson Gem and Mineral Show, a few years ago, when he noticed a blue-violet stone the size and shape of a potato. He looked it over, then, as calmly as possible, asked the vendor at that particular table, “So, you want fifteen bucks for this?”

The seller, realizing the rock was not as pretty as the others in the bin, said, “Na, you can have it for ten dollars.”

That stone has since been certified as a 1,900-carat natural star sapphire, which is approximately eight hundred carats larger than any other sapphire of its kind. It was appraised at 2.28 million dollars. However, it took someone who knew what to look for to recognize the value of that sapphire; to see it through eyes which no one had seen it before.

In Romans, chapter 1, we are given a brief, yet powerful account of how the apostle Paul looked at people and life in general. He saw life through different eyes than others. He looked at rough-cut people with a different perspective than others. And, he viewed his relationship to Christ and the church unlike others, yet he will challenge us to view life through the same eyes. Frankly, Paul lived with forever in mind. He seized life as if it were an undiscovered sapphire.

In a rare autobiographical moment, Paul says three things about himself. In so doing, he reveals his perspective that caused him to see life with an eternal purpose.

I Am Obligated!

In Romans, chapter 1, verse 14, Paul gives us the first of three self-describing statements. Notice verse 14.

I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish.

The phrase “under obligation” could also be worded, “indebted to”. Ladies and gentlemen, this is a life-changing, life-altering perspective. For Paul, living for Jesus Christ in the world was not an option, it was an obligation. Why? Because he considered himself deeply in debt.

Maybe you have come to this passage, but your mind is churning and wondering how you will ever get out of financial debt. You owe this creditor and that organization, this university and that department store. Maybe you are musing over a way to get ahead of the interest on your debt or planning a way to erase your mortgage several years in advance. Perhaps you are simply wondering how you are going to make the next payment. The average American is five to seven thousand dollars in credit card debt. The average household payment, in this community alone, on automobiles and automobile insurance is seven hundred dollars a month.

People are struggling over the fact that they are deeply in debt. Paul saw life like that. He is, at times in his letters, weighed down by the debt he has. Only, the debt he is thinking about and musing over and planning to pay is the fact that he is deeply in debt to God and has a payment to make to the world.

The Believer’s Three Debts

There are several passages of scripture that reveal the indebtedness of the believer in at least three ways.

Indebted to Jesus Christ

1. First, every Christian is indebted to Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers, in I Corinthians, chapter 6, verses 19 and 20,

. . . do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.

Paul takes us, by way of imagination, to the auction block where slaves are being sold. There you stand on that block, a slave to sin and Satan, helpless and in despair for your life. But then, Jesus Christ comes to that slave market and sees you. He steps forward to pay the price for you and you now belong to Him.

We can say, with full understanding, the words of the prophet Micah, who, as recorded in chapter 6, verse 4, speaks for God and says,

I . . . ransomed you from the house of slavery
...

Paul would write to the Ephesian believers, in chapter 6, verse 6,

[We are] slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.

You had better get it right; you had better see life differently than most, because Jesus Christ does not owe you anything, you owe Him everything. As the hymn says,

*Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe,
Sin had left the crimson stain,
He washed it white as snow.*

You are indebted to the love and sacrifice of your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Indebted to the church

2. That is not all of your debts. There is a second one. Every Christian is indebted to the church, or the body of believers.

Peter wrote in I Peter, chapter 4, verses 8 through 11,

Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaint. As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

In other words, every Christian has been given a gift by God and they are supposed to deposit their life-payments of that gift in serving the body of Christ. You have been given a gift, but it does not belong to you, it belongs to the body. And, you make your payments to the body in the form of spiritual ministry. In this way, you utilize your spiritual gifts by serving the body as a good steward in the manifold grace of God.

Indebted to the world

3. Thirdly, every Christian has a debt to pay to the world.

Paul wrote in I Corinthians, chapter 9, verse 16,

For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel.

Skip to verse 19.

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more.

Paul says, "I am not a free man. I could be, but I have voluntarily made myself a slave to all, in order that I might win some."

Paul specifically refers to that kind of debt in verse 14 of Romans, chapter 1.

I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish.

Literally, "I am a debtor or I am indebted both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the unwise or foolish."

These are parallel phrases, a merism. The second phrase simply repeats the thought of the first phrase, but uses different words.

Paul is saying he was indebted to those who spoke Greek and those who did not (the barbarians), or, in other words, every living human being. He then repeated his thought and said he was indebted to those who were wise (or the educated) and those who were foolish or unwise (the uneducated). Paul considered himself to be indebted to every living human being. Those who have discovered the treasure of the gospel must share it with everybody they can, as it is a debt they must pay to the world.

Most people have exactly the opposite attitude. They do not live life with forever in mind, they live life for the here and now and for whatever they can get out of it. They do not have a debtor's perspective; they have a creditor's perspective. They do not owe anybody! In fact, they think that everybody owes them! They live as if to say, and maybe they even say it, "The world owes me happiness; the world owes me a living; my family owes me respect; my boss owes me a promotion; my wife owes me dinner at 6 o' clock; my kids owe me good grades; my church owes me an easy parking space and a good seat."

Our church does not give you either one of those, does it?!

The truth is, according to the perspective of Paul, and everyone who lives with eternity in view, no one owes you anything, but you owe everyone everything.

That is different is it not? That is not what modern culture teaches; that is not what fallen, depraved, self-centered human nature says, as it stamps its feet and demands, "I want to get, get, get, get. Gimme, gimme, gimme!"

It is part of our fallen nature. Have you ever heard a four-year-old say, "Hey that's my favorite toy and you can keep it" or "That's mine, but I'll be happy to share it with you"?

I do not think so.

And we, as grownups, who grow old in Christ but who do not grow up in Christ, think only in terms of what we can get – what we can get from God, what we can get from the church, and what we can get from the world. We say, to the Lord, prayers that are nothing more than "gimme" prayers, "Gimme, gimme, gimme."

And, we say to the church, "I'll come to your church, if you give me this and provide me with that."

And, we say to the world, "That's mine, all mine, and I want to get, get, get, get, get more."

Paul thought in terms of what he could give. He looked at life with forever in mind and said with unusual perspective, "I am deeply in debt! I am in debt to Christ, in debt to His church, and in debt to the whole world."

I Am Eager!

Paul says another thing about himself in verse 15 of Romans, chapter 1.

So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

If Paul had not included this phrase, perhaps he could have been viewed as someone who was drafted into service rather than one who voluntarily enlisted. He could have had his shoulders drooped and his head hung low, saying, "I guess I've got to preach the gospel because of this indebtedness I have to the world."

The truth is, Paul was passionately excited about delivering the gospel. It was not simply an obligation, it was sheer satisfaction. He had discovered the fountain of life and he was constantly handing out cups of it to anyone who was thirsty. He was constantly looking for ways to reach people with the gospel of Christ.

Just over one hundred years ago, Dr. James Naismith joined the International Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) Training School in Springfield, Massachusetts. He faced, along with the other staff members, the age-old problem of bored young men during the winter months. The cold prevented activity outside and there were only a limited number of things to do indoors that could draw a crowd of young men.

On December 21, 1891, Dr. Naismith had an idea for a new game. He asked the janitor to find two boxes and to attach them to two walls opposite from one another. The janitor could not find boxes that were sturdy enough, but he did find two peach baskets that were. As directed, he attached them to the walls at a height of about ten feet. Within an hour, Naismith created thirteen rules and started the new game with a soccer ball. Since it involved throwing the ball into the peach baskets, he called the game, "basketball".

The crowds who are drawn to the game that he created have never gone away. It is interesting that, years later, when interviewed on his inspiration, he said, "I invented the game to lead young men to Jesus Christ."

I have, in my study, a booklet that I have given away many times. It was written by a business owner to his employees. He was eager to present the gospel to them, and came up with the idea that he would write a little booklet and give it to them for Christmas. He entitled the booklet, *The Reason Why*. In it, he explained, with simple illustrations, the truth of God's existence and Christ's sacrifice. Today, that booklet has been printed more than twenty five million times and has been translated into more than thirty languages.

Now, I use those rather intimidating illustrations, knowing that probably none of us will ever invent an international sport or be published in thirty languages. That is not the point, however. The breadth of our message and the extension of our message is God's business. You may deliver the gospel to only one child, or one neighbor, or one student, or a few friends, or a couple of family members. The believer is under obligation and always ready!

Isaiah tells his own personal story and, as we read this passage in the 6th chapter, listen for Isaiah's sense of grateful obligation and personal readiness. In verses 1 through 8, he writes,

In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple.

Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.

And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory."

And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of Him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke.

Then I said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts."

Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs.

He touched my mouth with it and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven."

Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

Isaiah was indebted to God because of the forgiveness of his sins and then, he was immediately eager to deliver the news. He was asked by the Lord, "Who will go for Us?"

He immediately responded, "Here am I. Send me!"

I Am Unashamed!

There is one more thing Paul says about himself in Romans, chapter 1. He has told us that he was indebted and that he was eager. Now, notice verse 16a.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel . . .

Perhaps someone in Rome would hear Paul saying, "Listen, I am eager to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome."

They might think to themselves, "Rome? You want to come to Rome and preach? Has anyone ever told you about Rome, Paul? This is where they worship the emperor Nero. This is a place that would despise the gospel of some felon who supposedly rose from the dead. C'mon, Paul, this is the capital city of the greatest empire on earth, not to mention that it is the most pagan, immoral square mileage in the kingdom. Besides, Paul, they worship Nero here, and they offer incense daily to Caesar. You can't have any other king but Caesar in Rome."

Perhaps Paul was thinking of David's words which he wrote in Psalm, chapter 119, verse 46,

I will speak of Your testimonies before kings and shall not be ashamed.

I could not help but think of this as I listened, with amazement, to a political figure who recently sat before a senate confirmation committee to be lambasted, ridiculed, and questioned. The media pummeled him as a weirdo, a flake, a fanatic. Why? Because he had some immoral skeleton in his closet? Because he is a member of some strange cult? No. Because he made a statement in a speech, a few years ago, that alluded to the Colonist's belief in the fact that there was no king but Jesus.

There is no king but Jesus! His similar belief in that statement brought a storm of controversy.

One recently defeated vice-presidential candidate mentioned God all the time. His prayers and his religion were front-page news – and it was all

positive. He was the darling of the media. His religion was a badge of honor. And, do we not hear presidents and leaders talk about God? They say, “God bless America,” and “Let’s pray to God,” and “God help us,” and God this and God that.

Yes, talk about God and you are within reason. However, just do not mention Jesus Christ. Do not say that name. And whatever you do, do not mention that Jesus is King of anything – then you are over the deep end; you have lost your mind.

“Paul, do you really want to come to Rome? They already branded Christianity as cannibalism in their misunderstanding of communion – they are accusing the believers of eating the dead. The Jews have branded the Christians as heretics and blasphemers. Christianity is unpopular here in Rome – it is offensive in its exclusive claims of man’s sin and Christ’s atonement.”

William R. Newell wrote,

Paul was little of stature, with weak bodily presence; with speech or delivery ability that was considered of no account in the opinion of men. Yet here is Paul, utterly weak in himself, and with his physical thorn; yet ready, eager to go to Rome. And to preach what? A Christ that the Jewish nation had themselves rejected; a Christ who had been despised and crucified by Roman soldiers at the order of a Roman governor; talk of your brave men O world! Where in history can you find one like Paul? Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, marched with the protection of their armies to enforce their will upon men. But Paul marched with Christ alone to the center of this world’s greatness; into an empire, which shook the world with nothing else than Christ alone.¹

Paul would say to them, and to all of us, “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ!”

Are you ashamed? Are you ashamed to bow your head at a restaurant or in the cafeteria and thank the Lord for your food? Are you ashamed to tell anyone you were in church on Sunday? Are you ashamed to carry your Bible to work or school? Are you ashamed?

Paul wrote, years later, to his son in the faith, Timothy, in II Timothy, chapter 1, verses 8 and 9,

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God, who has

saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity.

Skip to verse 12.

For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed;

(why Paul?)

for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day.

“What day is ‘that day,’ Paul?”

“Oh, it is the day when I see Him face to face.”

Paul saw the future, so he saw the present with different eyes. Because of that, he saw people differently as well.

Others saw lumps of rock worth only a handful of coins. Paul, however, saw star sapphires for the crown of His Lord and Savior.

What do you see?

The unchurched population of the world grows at the rate of 138,000 people every twenty four hours. From the time you left church last Sunday morning until the time you returned the next Sunday, the unchurched population of the world grew more than one million people. If you could stand the unsaved population of the world in a single line, they would form a line long enough to reach around the world eight times. If you were able to get in your car and drive past that line of people, the unredeemed millions, and you did not stop, but continued at sixty miles an hour for ten hours a day, speeding past them, unable to really look them in the face, much less say anything to them at all, it would take more than four years.

When you drive around town, what do you see? When you walk in the mall, what do you see? When you go to school or attend that game, what do you see? Paul would have seen people to whom he owed his life.

My friends, Paul lived an obligated life that was ready and eager and unashamed of the gospel of this soon coming King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He lived for the day when he would see the coming of His Savior and he lived in light of that coming day. That is another way of saying that Paul lived with forever on his mind. That determined the way he lived in the present – he was indebted, he was eager, and he was unashamed!

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ⁱ William R. Newell, Romans (Moody Press), p. 17.