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## *The Pain in Spain*

Romans 15

It's so good to be a dad. One of the greatest pleasures in life is when I hear Reed say, "Daddy!" with pure joy. But, I have to say, being a dad does make me feel older. Now, before some of you take umbrage at a 37 year old saying he feels older, hear me out. My father-in-law, bless him, has many dad-like traits, and one of them is his incredible capacity for grunting. He'll bend down to pick something up, and when he does he usually lets out some sort of "Unnn..." like his spine is compressing. And depending on how heavy the thing he's picking up, the louder the grunt. How many of you have dads who do that? Well, the other day I bent to pick something up and without even thinking about it I went, "unnn..." I was appalled. It gets worse. They say as you get older, things stop working, like hearing and vision and so on. Well, I haven't needed to update my prescription for years, I wear contacts mostly, but lately I've been squinting at stuff closeup. The horror! That's never happened to me before! I went to the ophthalmologist this week to get it checked out. I'm sitting in the room and he's doing that thing with the machine that's flipping different lenses in front of your eyes, "Is one better or two? Two better or three?" And as I'm answering he's kind of clucking and saying, "Uh huh, I thought so," calling out numbers to his assistant. And I'm thinking, oh no, my eyes really are decaying in my head. He finishes and pulls the lens machine from my head and says, "Well, what's happening is that your right eye is getting better." What!?!? All that suspense and it's getting better! Because my eye is getting better, my lens is too strong and that's why I was struggling to see up close.

Believe it or not, my vision problem has something to do with our reading in Romans today. I want to talk about offering a lens corrective, first of all with the book of Romans itself. We're approaching the end of the book, with one more chapter to go after we study chapter 15 today, but in many ways Paul is finishing his argument in this chapter. But it can be hard to see that with the way that we've been slowly going through, chapter by chapter. We read chapter one 11 months ago! Can you remember Paul's thesis statement? We'll revisit that in a moment, but you see what I mean.

My encouragement for you is to sometime sit down with your Bible and read the entire book of Romans in one sitting. This is exactly what the original hearers did. In chapter 16, which Pastor Bill will share more about next week, we learn more about Paul's friends, and the very first one he mentions is Phoebe. Phoebe is the letter carrier, and it was her job to read the letter. The way this would work is Phoebe would take the epistle, probably a scroll, read it, and as she read it people would ask her questions and Paul trusted her to understand his meaning and interpret it for them. They would do this all in one sitting, and because of that they saw the entire scope of Paul's argument at once in a way that we don't often get today because we read a few verses at a time, pause, then read a few more a week later.

So today, I'm going to read you the entire book of Romans. I'm just kidding, but I do want to recap his argument in broad strokes because it'll help us to understand how he is wrapping up his letter. Paul is wanting us to grab ahold of God's love in a bigger, grander way than perhaps we imagined. I think we

could tend to read Romans for what I get out of it. What's salvation mean for me? The beautiful Romans 8 promises are for me. Romans 12 is about how I should live. But the scope of what Paul is saying is sooo much grander! All the way back in Romans 1:16, Paul gives us the thesis of the letter. "For 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." Remember that Paul is writing to a congregation of believing Jews and Gentiles. Perhaps he's heard they're not getting along together. He knows he wants to visit them and partner in ministry with them. So he starts off with the whole premise of the letter basically saying, "HEY GUYS, we've got bigger fish to fry than whether eating meat sacrificed to idols is okay." The lens that Paul is giving the church in Rome revolves around that word "everyone." "The power of God for salvation to EVERYONE who believes..." Paul is going to make the case that salvation isn't just for the Jews, but for everyone.

So in chapter 1-3, Paul evens out the playing field. He begins with the bad news. It doesn't matter whether you are Jew or Gentile, "no one is righteous, no not one." For centuries the Jews thought that they had salvation in the bag by following the laws of God, but Paul says actually no, you're in the same boat as the Gentiles. EVERYONE needs salvation, and the way to get it isn't by working harder. Bad news!

Chapter 4-8 Paul gives us the good news. So if salvation isn't by works, how do we attain it? Like Father Abraham, we have faith! We believe, and receive the free gift of God through Jesus. Whether you are Jew or Gentile, EVERYONE can become God's children through faith in Jesus. Paul works through the objections to that in chapters 4-8, but it's the good news!

But what about Israel, Paul asks in chapters 9-11? If the Gentiles are now chosen by God, has he forgotten the Jews? NO, Paul says, EVERYONE includes the Jews too. We tend to focus on predestination in that passage of Scripture, and rightfully so, but the larger part of what Paul is saying there is that God still has a plan for Jewish people to be part of his family.

Then, in Romans 12-14 he gets down into the nitty-gritty: how does a community of believing Jews and meat-eating Gentiles live together? If God is gathering these outsiders into his family, what does that all look like? When you throw EVERYONE together, it can get messy, so Paul gets into the messy, practical stuff about loving one another.

So when we get to chapter 15, how do you think he's going to wrap it up? He's going to talk about Jews and Gentiles: everyone. Read with me, Romans 15 starting in vs. 8

For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name." And again it is said, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people." And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him." And again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope." May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

Did you see it? Did you see how he comes full circle here at the end of Romans, talking about Jews and Gentiles, the power of salvation for everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek? He quotes these Old Testament passages to reiterate the point that this was God's plan all along, to

go to the whole world. That is the big picture of Romans, that this project that God is about, salvation, the scope is huge!

Now, I recognize that for many of us this whole Jew/Gentile thing isn't really compelling. That's no longer the great cultural divide of our age, so it doesn't seem relevant. But, if what Paul is saying that the Roman church might be in danger of myopia, of not seeing the big picture of God's love, then I think that's still relevant today.

Let me try an example with you. Megan and I have a coffee mug given to Megan when she was supporting friends abroad. It says, simply, "I love Afghanistan." Would you ever say that? Would you say that about anywhere, much less Afghanistan? You tell me, when I say "Afghanistan," what pops into your mind? Osama Bin Laden? Terrorist? Bombings? Burkas? Dead American soldiers? It's hard to imagine caring for the Afghan people because of the current events that surround that country, but I promise you that when God looks at Afghanistan, he doesn't see what's happening on the news, he sees souls — people he loves. Read those Old Testament quotes again through different eyes: "Rejoice, O Afghans, with his people." And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Afghans, and let all the people extol him." And again, "The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Afghans; in him will the Afghans hope." If you don't get the whole Jew/Gentile debate, then thinking about Afghanistan may help because they just might be our version of "Gentile."

An "I love Afghanistan" mug might not push your buttons, but what is that part of the world you never thought of as part of God's plan? Maybe it's not that you hate any particular culture, I hope you don't, but I know myself, and I know human beings, and I know how limited our love can be. Maybe we don't have a hard time saying "God loves Gig Harbor," or even "God loves America," because it's what we know and love. As Paul is ending Romans, he is inviting us not just to love who we know, but to love who God loves. And God loves the world. That's the lens correction we need. God's love is so much bigger than we think.

This is personal for Paul, read on beginning in verse 14.

I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another. But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, but as it is written, "Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand."

This passage just drips with Paul's passion. You can tell he is just lit up about reaching people who've never heard of Jesus. He says he's proud of it, it's his ambition, to reach EVERYONE. He is gripped by the grandeur of God's love, and excited to be in the middle of it.

Let me just pause here for a moment. I've spent a good deal of my own life considering my own purpose, who God has made me to be and do. I still think I'm figuring that out, maybe you are too. So when I come across someone who knows with crystal clarity their purpose, I take notice. Why is Paul so passionate? How did he get the big picture, why does his heart beat about the power of salvation to everyone who believes? I think the reason is this: Paul was forgiven much. Jesus says in Luke 7:47, "He who is forgiven little, loves little." Paul's love for the world was great because he knew how much grace was given him. Remember that Paul's name used to be Saul, and when he was Saul he would persecute Christians, chasing them from city to city. Even worse, Saul thought he was doing the right thing so he was zealous about causing pain to God's people, and for that reason Paul calls himself the "worst of sinners." If God could love Paul, God could love anyone.

And I have to wonder that if our love is cold, our passion for the world is low, is it because we are too cavalier about God's forgiveness? Have you ever been knocked on your back by the idea, that if God could love you, he could love anyone? Just to be clear, Paul wasn't motivated by guilt, he was motivated by grace. He saw that in the microcosm of his own life, God's love was greater than he could have ever imagined, and that love extended to the whole world. So the worldwide scope of God's love was very, very personal for Paul. It determined his calling in life, what he was willing to give his time and energy to. And the lens corrective we are faced with when we read about his passion is, is it personal for you and for me? Does God's love matter to me as much as it did to Paul?

Paul goes on. He fills in the Roman church with his plans. Read starting at vs 22 with me.

This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while...

So what's the big deal about Spain? Keep in mind, that at in Paul's time the scope of known civilization was effectively the entire Roman Empire. There may have been the Persians to the East and barbarians to the North, but when someone said the "world" in that time, they meant the Roman Empire, not the globe we now call planet Earth. And the edge of that world to the west, the limit of the Roman Empire, was Spain. So, in effect, Paul wanted to take the gospel, the good news, to the edge of the civilized world as he knew it.

But he didn't want to do it alone. What I love about the letter to the Romans is that it is essentially a theological sales pitch to get the church in Rome to be a part of Paul's mission to get to the edge of the world. "Oh by the way guys, all that stuff I said about Jews and Gentiles, salvation for everyone who believes? You're a part of it." The letter to the Romans isn't just a theological treatise, it's an invitation. It was an invitation to the church in Rome to care about what Paul was doing, to care about what God was doing really. And, of course, it's an invitation to us too.

I hope, as a church, we don't walk away from the book of Romans merely knowing more about theology. That was never Paul's intent. He intends to invite us too, to dream big, to see God's love in as grand a light as possible, to have our own lens correction.

I don't, for a moment, believe that my preaching will give us that lens correction. That's the work of God's Spirit. Only God's Holy Spirit can open our eyes to see how great our sin, and how great God's love and forgiveness is, not only for us, but for the whole world, Jews and Gentiles. But I do think

there's one simple thing we can do to allow the Spirit to work in us, and that is to pray. In fact, Paul also asks the church to pray with him. He says in Romans 15:30, "I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf..."

I love that Paul calls prayer a "striving together." In prayer, we link arms with others, we strive together. In my house we have pictures all over the house from the places we've been. Spain, Greece, Cambodia, San Francisco, Chattanooga. Every day we see these pictures, they give us an opportunity to be reminded of the friends we have in those places, and the ministry they are doing, and those reminders can serve as prompts for prayer. When I see the photo we have of the Golden Gate Bridge, I can remember to pray for Troy Wilson in San Francisco. When I see that picture I got from Cambodia I remember to pray for my friends Chomno and Rosa and Leeta and I strive together with them. Very often, when we pray together in our weekend services, we pray for the concerns of our international partners, not just for the needs of our church, our town, and our country. I'm grateful for those pictures in my house and those prayers at church, because our prayers can be as limited as our love.

If there's one thing I want you to do after today, it's simply this: if you haven't already begun to do this, start praying for someone, someplace where God is doing something in the world. Just start with one. Maybe it's Afghanistan. Maybe you heard Joey and Brent talking earlier, and you begin praying for Agua Viva Ministries in Ensenada, Mexico, or for Pastor Marco. Maybe you take the invitation from Pastor Bill earlier and you go to the On Earth As It Is In Heaven celebration, and hear the stories there so that you can begin to pray for one person, one place.

Prayer is a dangerous thing, because God listens. I hope that as we heed Paul's invitation to strive together in prayer, not only will we see him answer those prayers, but that God will help us to see, to truly see with our hearts bursting, how great God's love is for our world.