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MY CELL PHONE CONFESSION

Romans 1:8-15

I love air shows. They appeal to me, but I’ve only gone to them 3 times in my entire life, only 2 in the last 30 years, so it’s not a frequent thing. I would go to them more often, but I don’t love them enough to put up with the hassle of attending them. The traffic, the parking headaches are a big obstacle to me. Laurie and I went to a cool one with Michael and Carissa about 5 years ago in Pensacola, Florida, where the Blue Angels put on a show right over the beach. The last one I’d been to before that was years ago at Miramar back when it was still Fighter Town, USA. There was a moment in that one that encapsulated one of the things that I like about air shows. They had a demonstration by at AV-8 Harrier. This is a forerunner to the current Marine variant of the F-35, a jet with vertical take off and landing capability. It could actually hover in mid-air. They had this jet fly at extreme low level down the runway, then it stopped, hovered, then flew backwards! It was remarkable. Then the pilot rotated the aircraft so it faced the crowd and had it bow to the crowd. It was awesome. But one of the things I recall vividly was the scream of that jet engine. To pull those tricks it had to have the engine going at full blast, which made it incredibly loud. It was a loudness that was ear-splitting and so powerful you could feel it in your gut. I love to feel the power of those engines. I got that same sense when the Blue Angels took off. Four jets rolled down the runway and took off together and the sound was indescribably powerful. Then a solo jet took off and almost as soon as its wheels were up it went straight up. I love the power.

Today I’m going to talk about power, but not physical power like those thunderous jet engines. This is a different kind of power, a power that is life changing. You’ll see what I mean as we look at Romans 1:8-17.

EXPOSITION

PAUL WAS NOT ASHAMED

In these verses Paul discussed his desire to minister to the Christians in Rome. He told them he gave thanks for them because people all over the world were hearing about their faith in Jesus. He constantly prayed for them and asked God to enable him to visit them and hopefully help them in their faith. He said he had planned to come to them but something always got in the way. Then he said he was eager to preach to those in Rome and made the interesting statement, “I am not ashamed of the good news.”

That strikes me as a curious thing to say because Paul had been traveling throughout large parts of the empire telling people about Jesus. He suffered significant persecution, but he was like the Eveready bunny because he just kept going and going. It seems obvious that he wasn’t the least bit reticent about the good news of Jesus. So why would he need to tell them he wasn’t ashamed of the good news of Jesus?

My suspicion is that there were some people who were claiming that Paul hadn’t been to Rome because he was afraid of going there. It’s fine if he’s off in some remote part of the empire in Pamphylia or Troas or Lydia or even Ephesus, spouting his message, but Rome is a different cat. It’s not hard to imagine someone saying, “Paul is afraid of coming here because this is sophisticated Rome, the center of power, and he knows if he comes here he’s going to be exposed as an unsophisticated rube trying to sell some new religion that will be laughed at here.”

Paul had already had a taste of that. Acts 17 tells us that after his ministry had led to riots in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea, Paul went to Athens, which was still considered the center of philosophy in that day. He eventually had the opportunity to speak to the leaders of the city. Though he did lead a few to faith in Jesus, the reception was not overwhelmingly positive. Many of them didn’t just reject his message, they sneered at him. They thought the message of Jesus was laughable.

Paul was very much aware of how the intelligentsia of his day regarded the message of Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 1:23 he wrote, “We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to the Jew and foolishness to the Gentiles.” That’s how the elites of his day viewed this new religion. It was a joke, worthy only of being sneered at.

From the time I was quite young, though I dreamed of being a professional athlete, I was very much aware that I was never going to be anywhere close to that level. I once had an experience that graphically revealed how far away from that I was. I had a good friend who played major league baseball and he invited me to come with him to the stadium when the team had a practice. I didn’t get to practice with them, but I did go in the clubhouse and meet some of his teammates and I was able to go stand on the field and watch while they practiced. Two things struck me that day. The first was that they were all big. We all know football players are huge and basketball players are ridiculously tall, but I found out that when you are standing next to them, major league baseball players are almost all big men. They are mostly tall and all are very strong and muscular. The second thing I noticed was when you are on the field with them you find out they are absurdly athletic. They are strong, fast, amazingly coordinated, almost graceful in their movements, they have powerful arms and they hit the ball with almost frightening power. My point here is that it brought home to me that there is an enormous gulf between me and professional athletes. The big leagues are for big league athletes, and that’s not me.

Some people apparently were saying about Paul that Rome was the big leagues, and he would be laughed out of the big leagues. He was fine, maybe, for the low minors, country bumpkins in the hinterlands of Galatia, but he was out of his league in Rome and he knew it. That’s why he had never visited there.

I can understand why someone might say something like that. When you look at the Gospel of Christ you will see some claims that could easily be scoffed at. Jesus, an unknown wood worker’s son from some backwater town in the middle of Hicksville, was actually God in human form? He was executed, but he came back from the dead and proved he was divine? Yeah, that’s a tough message to sell. Except Paul wasn’t reticent. Far from it. He was actually eager to go to Rome to tell people about Jesus. He wasn’t ashamed in the least. He felt everyone needed to hear this life giving message, and so he didn’t just want to go to Rome, he felt he *owed* it to the people of Rome to go there and tell them that they could find life in Jesus Christ. There was a big reason for his unabashed commitment to tell everyone he could about the good news of Jesus. That’s what we see next.

PAUL KNEW THE GOSPEL WAS THE POWER OF GOD

Paul says the message that he was spreading was the power of God. That message itself has enormous power. That’s the biggest reason why he wasn’t ashamed of the Gospel. Why would anyone be ashamed of the power of God? Yes, he knew some of the elites thought the message was foolish. But in 1 Corinthians 1:25 he wrote, “The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.” Maybe it’s foolishness, but it is wiser and stronger than the best human beings can come up with. The power of God is way better and way more important than whatever human beings might think.

Let’s think for a moment about the power of God. How great is the power of God? It is great enough that it was able to create a universe that is so immense, so vast and mysterious, that we can’t even come up with meaningful measures of its size. To give us at least some sense of it, let’s use a scale in which the earth is the size of a pin head, about 1/16th of an inch. That’s hard to imagine if you’ve ever been on a long airline flight, especially in the coach section. The flight seems interminable, endless. Flying at 500 miles per hour the earth seems to stretch on forever. Try to envision that vast expanse as a minuscule pinhead. On such a scale the moon would be an inch and a half away. That’s a distance that spacecraft traveling at 25,000 miles per hour would take 4 days to cross. The sun would be 49 feet away. So the earth would be where I’m standing and the sun would be at the back of the room. Remember, that 49 feet represents 93 million miles, a distance so great it takes light, traveling at 186,000 miles per second, 8 minutes to get from the sun to the earth. On this scale, where is Proxima Centauri, the nearest star? Outside the hotel, over on the beach, maybe in San Marcos? No, that star would be in Charleston, South Carolina, more than 2400 miles away. The galaxy nearest to ours, Andromeda, would be 1.5 billion miles away. The most distant galaxies would be 8 trillion, 53 billion, 551 million miles away on that scale. This thing is so huge it is literally inconceivable. God’s power created all that.

What do you think is the most powerful thing human beings have ever created? What pops into my mind is nuclear bombs. They have power that is frightening. Imagine that you came upon a large, unusual looking box, and upon investigation discovered there was a nuclear weapon inside it. How careful would you be around that thing? You’d want nothing more than to get rid of it, and you would be obsessively careful with it. Yes, nuclear weapons are enormously powerful. But NASA has said that an Atlantic hurricane packs as much power as 10,000 nuclear bombs! A magnitude 9 earthquake has as much power as 25,000 nuclear bombs! You begin to get the picture that God has power that makes anything we humans might do look puny in comparison.

Consider this. The temperature of the sun is 17 million degrees. If you could heat up one grain of sand to that temperature, that one grain of sand would cause everything within a 60 mile radius to erupt in flames! That is how massively hot the sun is, and the sun is just an average star out of many billions in existence.

God’s power is unlimited, inconceivable. Paul claims this power resides in the message of the good news of grace through Jesus Christ. But the power that he had in mind was not just the power to create or to make things happen in the physical universe. Paul says the Gospel, the good news of Christ is the inconceivably massive power of God for salvation for everyone who believes in Jesus.

What does that mean? What is salvation, and why does it matter? Most people don’t think they care much about salvation, whatever it is, so why is this important? Acts 27 tells the story of Paul’s unfortunate sea voyage to Rome. He was being transported by authorities to Rome to stand trial before Caesar after he had been falsely accused by opponents and kept in jail by a corrupt judge who wanted a bribe. The authorities put Paul and his guards on a ship to sail to Rome. Unfortunately not long after they set sail a violent storm roared in and the ship was blown way off course. Soon it was in peril of sinking. The ship was battered so badly that they dumped the cargo. Verse 20 says they “gave up all hope of being saved.” The word used there is the root of the word translated “salvation” in Romans 1:16. We understand that sense of the word, it meant not dying. It was about literally saving their lives. You see the same use of the word in Matthew 8:25 when Jesus and his disciples were in a boat that was caught in a storm. The boat was about to go down, the disciples were freaking out because they thought they were going to die, and Jesus was asleep. They woke him up and said to him, “Lord, save us! We’re going to drown.” They needed rescue from certain death. Again, the word save is the root of the word salvation.

But what does having salvation, being saved, have to do with us? Most of the time we aren’t in life or death situations where our lives need to be saved. In fact, I can’t recall a single occasion when I feared my life was in true peril and if someone didn’t rescue me I was going to die. So how do I need salvation? What is this salvation about?

People most think about being saved from eternal condemnation and being admitted into heaven when they die. That is the most obvious aspect of salvation and one of the most frequent in the Bible. In Romans 5:9 Paul said, “Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him!” We see another reference to salvation being that future rescue in 1 Peter 1:3-4. “In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you.” In verse 5 he says we are “shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.” So salvation is about that future hope that we will be raised to life after we die and will live in God’s eternal kingdom of light with him.

So salvation most assuredly involves that hope of eternal life that we enter into after we die or when Christ comes back. This is a hugely important promise. It is helpful to remember that the word that is used so often of this aspect of what God has done for us in Christ is a word that is used in life and death contexts. If you took the spiritual realm and eternity out of the picture for a moment, which is how most people commonly live, what is the worst thing that could happen to you? It is that you can die, right? That is the biggest fear. It is how we describe the most urgent issue, it’s a matter of life and death.

Our son, Toby, had a case in which a man arrived in the emergency department suffering from significant pain in his abdomen. Toby’s examination of him told him immediately that the man had appendicitis, but he wanted to confirm his diagnosis. He sent him for a test that revealed the man’s appendix was swollen to twice its normal size and was on the verge of bursting. Toby informed the man of his diagnosis and told him he needed immediate surgery. A surgeon and an operating room were already scheduled to perform the procedure. But the man balked. He said he had some things he needed to take care of first, some tasks to do. Toby and some assistants had to tell the man that this was potentially a matter of life or death and that they were trying to save his life. They finally got through to him that the other things he was concerned about might be real issues for him, but that they sure wouldn’t matter if he lost his life by trying to deal with them instead of dealing with the most urgent matter of his appendicitis.

When something is life or death, we think that is the most urgent matter we could face. It takes precedence before anything else. The point here is that there is something bigger than a life or death situation. It is eternal life or eternal condemnation. In a couple of months I am going to have a birthday, and it is one that is kind of significant in our family. As of this coming birthday I will be the same age that my dad was when he died. When he was the age that I am right now my dad already had the cancer that would take his life. To add to the ominous nature of this birthday, my dad’s father also died at that same age. Notice a trend? That kind of thing can get your attention. It brings home rather starkly the fact that my term of office as a breathing human being has limits, and I’m way, way closer to the end than to the beginning. If you were about to die, what would it be worth to you to have a way to save your life? It would probably be worth a lot. A bigger question is, what would it be worth to you to know for a fact that this life is not the end for you, that there is a next chapter and that next chapter is way better, way more joyful than this one? How much would it matter to you to know that an eternal life where you would live as a real, live physical being living in peace and joy and enjoying the presence of loved ones awaits you? That this new life is a real thing? That would be of infinite worth. This is in the “I’d give anything” category. This is bigger than life or death, because at some point for every one of us, a life or death situation is going to end in death. We all know that. It is a painful and unavoidable reality for 100% of us.

What can we do to guarantee for ourselves that we will live again after we die? By our own power, we can’t do anything. If we could, we would. But that is simply not within our human ability. In verse 16 Paul said he is not ashamed of the gospel. The Greek word translated “gospel” is *euaggelion*. The root of it is *aggelion*, which is the word we get “angel” from. An angel was a messenger. The definition of *aggelion* is a message, an announcement, or news. Tacked on to the front of that word is the prefix *eu*, which means “good.” So what Paul was not ashamed of is the good message, the good announcement, or the good news. This good announcement is that what we could not do for ourselves, God has done for us through Jesus Christ. It was something so big that it requires the matchless, limitless power of God. What can defeat death? What can make dead human beings live again, and not just live again, but live forever? Only the unlimited power of God. That power is able to create a universe so vast we can’t comprehend it. It is able to create life itself. It takes that kind of power to save us eternally, and that power comes to us through the good news of Jesus Christ.

That is awesome, but there’s something else amazing about the power of God in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In Romans 6:4 Paul wrote, “We were therefore buried with him (Christ) through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” Paul said that our salvation actually has impact on us even now. It means we have a new life now. In 1 John 5:11-12 the apostle wrote, “God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.” If you have the Son, if you have salvation, you have life. You have it right now.

Eternal life has to do not just with duration of life, but with a quality of life. It is the kind of life we will experience in God’s eternal kingdom, a life of peace, joy, love and goodness. Though we don’t have that in its fullness right now, these verses tell us that the power of God, the gospel of Christ, begins to give us this new kind of life. That is consistent with what Galatians 5:22-23 tells us about the fruit of the Spirit. The result of living in the gospel of grace is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and so on. In other words, the good news of grace in Christ is the power of God to change us, to change our hearts and lives even now.

Isaiah 12:3 says, “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.” Through the Gospel of grace in Christ, we will have joy. Psalm 35:9 says, “Then my soul will rejoice in the Lord and delight in his salvation.” Salvation means we will be delivered into a life where there is joy. Psalm 62:1 says, “Truly my soul finds rest in God, my salvation comes from him.” Salvation means rest for our souls, being able to live in peace. Psalm 119:41 says, “May your unfailing love come to me, Lord, your salvation, according to your promise.” To have salvation is to live in God’s unfailing love. Psalm 69:29 says, “But as for me, afflicted and in pain, may your salvation, God, protect me.” Life will bring us affliction and pain, but even in that God’s salvation give us protection. Isaiah 12:2 says his salvation is our strength, which will enable us to stand. Colossians 1:12-13 says God, “has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves.” We have been saved, rescued, delivered from darkness into light, a place of freedom, hope and joy. This is what it means to have salvation.

When a person puts trust in the good news of Jesus, the power of God has begun to do an awesome thing in him or her. It is the power give us a new kind of life, right now. This power is at work to change us, to transform our lives into something new and beautiful.

I have noticed a generational difference between me and my children and those of their generation. I think one of the primary uses of a phone is to talk to other people. You call them, they call you and you talk. Their generation doesn’t think that. They actually don’t like talking on the phone unless they are in a car and can’t text. Otherwise, the phone is for texting, social networking, taking selfies and surfing the Internet. I’ve adapted to texting, but I find that it’s fraught with peril, not the least of which is autocorrect. I was texting Toby about some moves the Padres made before Major League Baseball froze and I said about one of them, “That’s a good sign.” Only that’s not what my text said. Inexplicably autocorrect changed it to, “ that’s a hood sign.” I followed up by saying, “I meant hood sign.” Finally I said, “I keep typing good and my phone keeps changing it to “hood.” Annoying. I saw one example of this in which a wife texted her husband, “Happy birthday, dead husband.” He typed back, “I assume you meant dear.” She did.

The thing is, I confess, I don’t get the most out of my cell phone. My phone has tons of apps on it and there are thousands more available, but for the most part I don’t use the thousands of apps available to me. This thing is so powerful. It is a thousand times more powerful and absurdly more useful than the big IBM mainframe computer which had its own building that I used when I was in college. It has enormous power and potential, and I mostly just use it for my familiar patterns. I don’t get out of it what it is capable of.

The good news that has brought us salvation is kind of like that I fear. It is massively powerful, but we tend to just sort of muddle along not getting the most out of it much of the time. The question is, are we living the new life that is promised to us through our salvation, or are we living just the way we always have? Do we look like people in whom the power of God is at work?

APPLICATION

It would be easy to come away from this thinking that we don’t see the power of God in us, and so we commit to trying harder to produce the kind of life that is promised as a result of our salvation. But that is exactly the wrong thing to do. What we need is not our power, but the power of God. We need to be very clear, the power of God is the gospel of grace, so we will experience the power of God as we live by the gospel of grace and apply it to our thoughts and our actions in every area of life.

I will give you a trivial example. Recently our clothes dryer, which was around 35 years old, dried its last load. We have been expecting this for some time. A 35 year life span would be brief for a human, but for a dryer it’s remarkable. So we went to the store to buy a new dryer. Laurie told the salesman that our dryer had lasted 35 years and he said, “Well, don’t expect that again. Whatever you get, it won’t last anywhere near that long.” We settled on a new machine and were happy to learn that they could deliver it the next day. These days that’s like a miracle. However, it turned out to be not so miraculous. Our laundry room isn’t a room at all. It is a glorified closet. When they delivered our new dryer we learned that they make dryers now bigger than they used to. The new dryer wouldn’t fit in our laundry room, er, closet! They took it back to the store and we had to start all over. We quickly ran into a problem. The dryers were all too big to fit in our space! We went on the Internet searching and were frustrated to find they were all too big. Excuse me for not owning a McMansion with vast open spaces in a laundry room the size of a gym so a behemoth dryer can easily fit in it. We could find only one at the store that would fit in our house. Unfortunately, it is a low end, poorly rated model. It’s made by the Acme Rocket and Appliance company, made familiar by the Roadrunner cartoons. I was concerned that we’d have about the same level of satisfaction as poor Wile E. Coyote typically got with his products from Acme. Would this thin blow up in my face like what always happened to the coyote? I was frustrated and unhappy about our prospects. But finally I applied the gospel of grace to that situation. What is the message of grace in Christ? It is that what God has supplied in Christ is sufficient for us, and that message pertains to every part of life. What God supplies is enough. So this new Acme dryer is what God has supplied, and it will be enough. What if it turns out to be as poor a performer as we fear? What God supplies is still enough. If this is what God wants for us, so be it. God will still work his will in our lives, will bring good for us from this, and supply us with what we need to really live, to live with joy, peace, love and hope. I can actually apply the gospel to our dryer, and it brings peace and even joy to that situation. We are supposed to receive our new Acme dryer tomorrow. Honestly I’m not all that optimistic about how it’s going to work, but living in the gospel I’m fine with it and looking forward to how God’s plan will work. Remind me of that when the dryer blows up.

We can live by the gospel in every aspect of our lives. When we apply the message of God’s grace to our relationship to him, to our view of ourselves, to every person we meet, to every circumstance we encounter, knowing that what God supplies is enough, we will end up being a new kind of person with a whole new way of life that reveals the power of God at work in us. We have friends who right now are dealing with grinding, gut wrenching hardships in their lives. In the pain and difficulty of all of it, life, peace, hope, even joy is possible for them if they will apply the gospel truth to their situations. Let’s live by the gospel of grace in every way and every circumstance, and let’s watch God’s power work in us.