

Explore the Bible: Compelled

February 12, 2020

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for March 1 focuses on Romans 1:1-7,13-17.*

It's hard for someone raised during the Jesus Movement of the late 1960s and whose parents and grandparents witnessed the post-World War II revival of faith in America to believe. Yet, it seems we may well inhabit a generation when there has never been more confusion about what it means to be a Christian. Sadly, the confusion appears to be coming from the church, not outside the church.

We have confused our faith with a political position or one particular stance on one ethical matter or another. God's grace will not, cannot be, contained by our man-made structures. Grace compels us to something greater than being moral referees, putting people into moral strait jackets as though behavioral perfection earns us a better place in heaven.

In this week's biblical text, the apostle Paul was not so much attempting to pen a treatise regarding the true definition of who a Christian might be. Though his words are critical to understanding the faith we profess, Paul is simply sharing what his encounter with faith and grace has created in him.

That's all any of us can do. We can tell our version of the Christian faith. We may quote others, even Scripture, but it is the faith we've encountered and are willing to confess that gives our witness its truth authenticity. We can and should tell others of the only Jesus we know and then leave it to God to sort out what becomes of our words.

As with any New Testament Scripture, we can spend our time dissecting the linguistic and grammatical meanings of each word. That method of

study is very worthwhile. However, sometimes, we can gain a deeper meaning of a text by stepping back and looking at the bigger picture. Sometimes, we get so lost in the details of a given passage, it is as if, in a play on words, we're so close to the trees we can't see the larger forest.

The apostle gets to the crux of the Christian faith by speaking of Christ's resurrection from the dead.

At just the right time

On April 16, 1947, in the port of Texas City, about 30 miles south of Houston on the western shore of Galveston Bay, a huge cargo ship, the SS Grandcamp, was moored at the dock. In her hold, she carried 2,200 tons of ammonium nitrate, the primary component of some fertilizers and explosives.

A carelessly tossed cigarette in the ship's hold appeared to be the culprit of a fire that led to the ignition of the highly volatile ammonium nitrate. The resulting explosion killed 581 people, all but vaporized the dock and obliterated thousands of homes and businesses in the city. That explosion remains, to this day, the deadliest industrial accident and the largest non-nuclear explosion in American history.

A few miles away, a young mother was caring for her infant in its crib. When the blast wave hit their house, it shattered a window in the baby's room, spraying it with razor-sharp shards of glass. It just so happened that, at exactly the right moment, the mom's hand was covering the baby's face when one of those shards penetrated the back of her hand, saving the baby from all but certain death.

In this same letter, Paul later writes that "at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly," (Romans 5:6). At just the right time in God's purpose, Christ took upon himself the nails on the cross

that should have been ours. It was the resurrection of Christ that completed God's work to accomplish our salvation.

Vessels of grace

In Romans 1:5-6, Paul writes that it was through Christ's resurrection that we have received grace that empowers us to call people to faith. In other words, being Christian is not simply for our personal benefit. And, faith is not merely intellectual ascent to certain doctrinal precepts.

The faith and the grace that poured out of Christ's empty tomb has given us more than something good to believe. Paul's witness is that his encounter with grace has "obligated" (v. 14) him to call all who will listen to a personal encounter of their own with God's grace in Christ.

To be truly Christian means to see ourselves as more than "saved." We are more than receptacles of God's good grace. It means to see ourselves as vessels of grace that we are constantly pouring out on the world in which God has given us to live. As Paul's words bear witness, it is in the sharing of God's grace we've received that we truly transformed into Christ-followers.

We all have memories of occasions when, at just the right time, God provided mercy, grace, faith, direction and hope. When we reflect on those moments, we can't help but thank God over and over. Correspondingly, our gratitude should compel each of us to share what we've come to know of Christ with others, in any way God has gifted us to share.

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