

Explore the Bible: Reach

May 11, 2020

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for May 31 focuses on Romans 15:14-21, 30-32.*

In my first summer youth ministry experience, in the mid-1970s in Odessa, I remember one painful experience with regard to “evangelism.” Somehow or another, I became incredibly distraught over an incident, the specifics of which are now forgotten. I had attempted to lead a person to Christ without success. I was so very worried about their eternal future because they had not verbalized their commitment to Christ to me.

What I do remember is that, when I got back to the church, I ran into an older staff member. I told him about my struggle. He saw the distress on my face.

Just barely this side of scolding, he reminded me that it was not my job to “save” anyone. All I had to do was be as faithful to Christ as possible and leave the saving to Holy God. I cannot remember his exact words, but I never have forgotten the power of them. Though I did not know it at the time, his few words altered the course of my ministry, even my life, to this very day.

There is simply no way to describe the profound impact that is the result of trusting God for everything.

We all have memories that bring pain, even in our attempts to be faithful to Jesus. The Apostle Paul almost certainly had them. Yet, nearing the end of his life, he chose to focus on what he had also done that he hoped was good.

He uses those memories to encourage fellow believers to try to accomplish

the same. Then, he makes a commitment. "I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me" (v. 18). That is a profound statement!

'Jesus, my soul's in your hands'

As far back as memory serves, I had been taught to believe I was responsible for influencing others to believe as I did, and therefore, be saved. I even once heard a famous pastor/evangelist publicly say to those gathered to hear him in a church sanctuary, "If those of us in this room don't tell the lost about Jesus, they will go to hell."

Tracing that logic to its ultimate end, it means the vast majority of humanity ever born was born for the sole purpose of going to hell.

At that moment, a fellow pastor leaned over and said to me, "I don't believe that." Neither does this preacher-boy. Over the years I have come to believe there is not one thing about that evangelist's statements that is anywhere close to the truth, much less biblical.

After preaching a typical sermon on evangelism one Sunday, I came to the end of the sermon and said this: "We'd probably say "Amen" to my sermon on the basics of evangelism. Yet, what does it tell us about what we truly believe that, once we leave this service, we'll all go eat lunch and go home and take a nap. If we truly believe what I asked, how could any of us take time to sleep or eat without fearing that someone who is hell-bound will not hear of Jesus because we did not personally tell them?" It was very quiet in the sanctuary.

Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Paul proclaims, "'Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand'" (v. 21).

The country singer, Kris Kristofferson, sings, "Why me, Lord?" The song

includes a much-repeated phrase: “Lord help me, Jesus. My soul’s in your hands.” I was skeptical when I first heard them. Then, I researched his spiritual journey. As it turns out, he speaks of a moment in a worship service in which he simply trusted Jesus. Mine is not to judge his genuineness or anyone else’s, for that matter. The man publicly asked Jesus to take hold of his soul. The song is his profession of faith. What more is needed?

Ask the thief on the cross who, in his dying moments, asked Jesus to remember him in the afterlife. Jesus promised to do so. There was no repeating the verbiage of someone walking him through the “plan of salvation” much less promising that, if he repeated the presenter’s words, he would be saved. There was no public repentance of sin, no walking the aisle nor public profession of faith nor any baptism—only the promise of Jesus not to forget him.

If Jesus remembers us when he comes into his kingdom and, if as Paul stated, even those who have never heard of him will come both to see and understand, what should be our take-away?

There is so very much hope in Paul’s words. Could it be that God’s true “plan of salvation” is so much grander and broader than we could possibly imagine?

This is one Jesus-follower who certainly hopes so.

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