

## **An Epistle to Remember**

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### **Abstract**

*This article is a sermon that was given in a chapel service at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in which the preacher imagines what it might be like to have been Tertius, Paul's secretary in the letter to the Romans.*

Eight hours straight! Both yesterday and today! Oh, my hand is killing me—fast pace, complex argumentation, yet, very interesting content. It is not easy to be an amanuensis in days like these, and if the apostle has more of these long epistles in mind, I might think of asking for a pay raise. These are not very profitable times for our Scribes' Guild. Yet, to work for the apostle is really priceless. What could compare with such a unique privilege as seeing the apostle in his theological workshop?

I have never seen him go through such a range of emotions in one epistle; such a concentration of mind and soul, such depth and breadth of theological reflection, such balance between theological expression and down-to-earth principles for living. After all it was a letter for the church of God in Rome, the capital of the world.

I wished you could have seen his righteous anger when he talked about the way the Gentiles rejected the knowledge of God; they, who have known something about God, just turned away from him and darkened their minds and hearts; or his annoyance with his people, the Jews, who, while having the Scriptures and all the other privileges of being the elect people of God, nonetheless were no better than pagans. I wished you could have seen his glowing face when he dictated the part about God reconciling the sinner, through faith in Christ. I wished you could have seen his puzzled face when he talked about his dilemma of living in the flesh under the influence of sin but with a mind that loves the Law of God, and how God's Spirit sides with us in fulfilling the demands of that Law. I wished you could have seen his tears when he reflected on the greatest mystery of all, the hardening of his people, the Jewish people, who, although being the very people of God, rejected Jesus and did not acknowledge him as their Messiah. I wish you could

have seen his transformed countenance when he slowly glided from his deep theological argument about the future of Israel and the nations, into one of the most thrilling doxologies of all times,

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.

It all started in Corinth when he told me of his plans to visit the church in Rome. “Tertius, my son,” he said one day, “we have work to do. I have finally made plans to visit Rome, and before I go there I want to send an epistle to the saints in that city; and I have to do it right now.”

“Oh, no, Paul, not today,” I said; “You know that the Isthmian athletic games have just started; these are the most important two weeks of the year here in Corinth; we cannot do that work now; not for a fortnight; you know how much I longed to go and watch them at the stadium; it’s the first time I am in Corinth during the games and who knows where I will be in two years from now. I even have an extra ticket, if you were interested . . . Could we, please, postpone the letter for a while?”

Those who know the apostle could easily guess that I did not have my way. I backed off just in time, or else he would have started to warn me about “making the most of our time,” during these “evil days,” and about the perils of “loving this world more than the gospel,” or the like. I could not talk him out of his plan, especially since this time, unlike all his previous attempts, it seemed to me that he was confident that he will eventually get to Rome.

So I tried to turn this disappointment about not being able to see the games and put some positive spin in it. Actually, when he first mentioned his plans to visit Rome, I thought to myself, “Finally the old man has come to his senses. He goes to Rome in order to take care of some of his outstanding problems.” You now, the apostle does have a few shortcomings, which he might be able to correct with a trip to Rome. Quite between you and me he is not the most, what should I say, handsome man. There are several handicaps, which are a huge disadvantage to his preaching and mission. I am not talking here about the fact that he is very short of stature; unlike the other famous Benjaminite, our king Saul, whose name he actually borrowed. Neither am I referring to his unusual bowlegged-ness. These features, as undesirable as they might be among today’s men, would be tolerable if it were not for his facial outlook: a fairly unpleasant countenance, a prominent baldness, and those scary, bushy, united eyebrows. And as for

the nose, well, I don't think you've seen a bigger or a more crooked one. And then you have the eyes with that constant discharge. It is quite unpleasant.

But there is yet another problem, which to me seems to be more serious still: his rhetorical style. He is alright when he preaches, you know, but still he does not fare well when compared to the rhetoricians of Rome. Yes, he is quite learned and fluent in several languages; yes, he knows the Scriptures very well, but when it comes to public speaking he is no Cicero. A little bit of improvement in this area would do him no harm. So I told to myself, he finally decided to go to Rome and use this opportunity to go to the world's best schools for public speaking; he could also go to the best eye doctors that our world has seen; he might even consider checking out a few cosmeticians if his purse is large enough.

But as I was contemplating the benefits that a trip to Rome might have for the apostle, I realized that none of these concerns were on his mind. He wanted to go to Rome not for what Rome could offer him, but for what he could offer to Rome. He was on his way to the capital of the world not to benefit from it, but to have it benefit from him. At first I thought he must have been joking if he thought that he had something that Rome did not. What could he, a Jew from Tarsus, have that Rome lacked? What did he know that the citizens of Rome did not? I have to say that when you looked at it carefully, it bordered arrogance at best or lunacy at worst; what did he mean that Rome needed to hear him?

But then he started to dictate the epistle and while still on the first rows I realized that he was probably right. While Rome indeed did not need anything that Paul himself had or could give, Rome did need to hear the message that was entrusted by God to him, the gospel, the good news of salvation that must be heralded to all the nations under the sun, even to Rome. I have never heard in my life such a thorough, clear presentation of that gospel. I wish I had about four hours to give you the unabridged version of his epistle; but since I only have a limited space a summary might be the next best thing.

He started with a nut-shell presentation of this good news that he preaches, which is just as much the gospel of God, the one who is the ultimate originator and source of this gospel, as it is the gospel of Christ, of the one who has accomplished it. This gospel, he said, has been foretold in the Scriptures all along. This is where his unmatched mastery of the Hebrew Scriptures helped him so much. He wanted to make sure that no one would ever think that this gospel is his own invention, or even the invention of the apostles. No, God has promised it and proclaimed in the Scriptures, through the work of his holy prophets.

This gospel centers in one individual, that unique person of Jesus. The apostle was quite anxious to communicate that this Jesus was both the son of David and the son of God. I guess, for the skeptics in the audience, it would not be very difficult to demonstrate that Jesus was a descendent of king David. All they would have to do is to go to the temple in Jerusalem and check out the genealogies, which are carefully kept there. However, it would certainly be more difficult to prove that Jesus was God's Son. How could one prove that? That's where Paul brought in the ultimate proof of Jesus' divine and messianic identity: his resurrection from the dead. You see, for Paul, the resurrection of Jesus was the most unambiguous declaration and attestation of his divinity. That humble, ordinary grandson of David, Jesus of Nazareth, was no other than the Son of God in power, the one who has been given full authority over the world, over history and over creation.

The most distinctive aspect of this gospel, however, is not in any of these truths, important as they may be.

The Gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes for in the Gospel the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith . . .

The gospel is not simply a message that people need to hear or to know. It is not just another piece of information to be filed away, alongside scores of competing claims of the other "Messiahs" of our day. Not at all. The gospel is more than a message; it is a message that triggers God's saving action for those who hear it and believe it. It is a message that just as much declares God's saving act in Christ, as it sets it in motion for the benefit of those who hear it and believe it. It is a message that not only talks about God's power and God's righteousness for the salvation of the one who believes, but also activates God's power and God's righteousness to be fully effective in saving the sinners who believe in Jesus.

Just think for a while on how magnificent this thought is. The gospel is the power of God for salvation. The same language that the Scriptures of the old covenant used to speak of God's saving power is now descriptive of God who saves within the perimeter of the new covenant. David, our beloved psalm writer, most certainly would have agreed with Paul; when you contemplate God's salvation, either that of his old people Israel from Egypt, or that of the countless suffering righteous ones throughout our history, the first attribute of God singled out by the Scriptures is God's power.

As I was putting on paper these words, however, I started wondering why the apostle was so keen to link the gospel with the power of God.

Why power? Why this attribute of God and not another one? Why not link the gospel to God's love, or his holiness, or his omniscience? Why did Paul choose power as the first attribute of God to be explicitly singled out in connection with the gospel? I think that the answer to my query was soon given as the apostle developed his argument. It became quite evident when he expounded on his understanding of "sin," that awful reality of human condition. When he talked of sin, of its power, of its universality, and of its consequences, it was clear why he had to highlight God's power. It was evident that nothing less than the power of an omnipotent God could help the offspring of Adam and Eve in their confrontation with this malevolent force.

And when you think about it, he was right. Take any of the sins from the long list of vices and you will see that those trapped in any particular sin are no better off than a slave to that sin. You can plead with an alcoholic as long as you want to try and stop his love for drinking. You can give him all the scientific evidence that drinking is not good for one's health; you can provide all the statistics in the world of ruined lives and families sacrificed on the altar of that "just one more drink," but that would not help him a bit, would it? He will probably agree with you, but that in itself would still not give him the power to escape the dominance of alcohol in his life, to enable him to free himself from alcohol's grip. The truth is that he has become a slave to the god of alcohol. This is in fact the very concept that Paul used, slavery to sin, which is applicable to any sin that creeps into our lives, be it wickedness, or greed, or envy, or murder, or strife, or deceit, or malice, and so on. And here is the most evident truth of them all: man cannot save himself; man does not have the power to free himself, to extract himself from the controlling power and dominance of sin. We are slaves to sin; it is our master, and nothing in us can help us achieve independence from it or to escape its dominance. It is more powerful than the mightiest of men; it is shrewder than the wisest of men; it is subtler than the most vigilant of men. That is precisely why we need God's power, for nothing less than the power of an omnipotent God can offer remedy for our condition; nothing else can save us from the tyranny of this malevolent despot.

But God's power, while having the pride of place in the panoply of God's attributes, as far as the gospel was concerned, was in Paul's thought immediately followed by God's righteousness, a second attribute of God explicitly linked with the gospel ". . . for in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed . . ."

I have to say at first it wasn't very clear to me in what way I should understand this phrase, "the righteousness of God." Was the apostle referring strictly to a descriptive attribute of God, such as God as being righteous? Or was he referring more to an act of God, something that

God does on behalf of the sinner who believes, the act of declaring, or maybe even more, the act of making the sinner righteous? While I wasn't completely certain about this aspect when he was dictating this part, the more I think about it now, the more confident I am that he was referring to the latter and not the former. Yes, God's righteousness as one of God's attributes is important, in fact it is the very foundation for the truth which the apostle wanted to highlight. But what seems to be foremost on the apostle's mind was that act of God, the act of declaring the sinner who believes to be righteous, to be free of guilt, to stand no longer indicted or condemned before God's righteous tribunal.

But how could that happen? How could a just God do that? How could a righteous God declare a sinner not guilty? Wouldn't such a scenario make a mockery of God's justice? It would certainly be the case even in a human court, let alone in a divine court.

Well I did not have to wait long for Paul to address this very dilemma. And while his answer was fairly long, I can only give you now the gist of his complex argument. It all centered on the act of redemption that came by the death of Christ Jesus. When Jesus died, he died as a sacrifice of atonement. Through that sacrifice, he became the new "mercy seat," the place where God in his righteousness both punishes sin, because of his justice, but gives mercy to the believer, because of his loving-kindness. You see, Christ on the cross met the rigor of God's justice. The wrath of a righteous God, offended and insulted by all the sins of humanity, fell on him; he paid the price for our guilt, in order that God could, at the same time, remain righteous, and yet justify the sinner, declare the one who believes in Christ guilt-free.

This is the dual inner mechanism of the gospel which saves: God's power and God's righteousness. What a fascinating pair of divine attributes. Well, I have to say that it does make a lot of sense. Just think for a moment that mankind would have to deal with a God in whom these two attributes, power and righteousness, would not be perfectly balanced. Suppose that you would have an all-powerful God who is not perfectly righteous. He would be a rather capricious God, wouldn't he?—a God who always modifies his standard of good and bad, always adjusting it according to his latest interests, never dependable, never reliable. Who would want to have to deal with such a whimsical God? Such a God would look more like a Roman Caesar, all powerful, but, oh, so selectively and inconsistently righteous. Or suppose that you would have a perfectly righteous God, a perfect anchor in the moral universe, but who is not all-powerful, who is unable to enforce his righteousness in his universe. That God would be no different than all the gods in the pantheon—perfectly righteous yet impotent in enforcing their standard of righteousness in the human affairs. No, the God of the Scriptures, the

God of Paul's gospel, is a perfect combination of judicial and executive ideals.

The gospel then, in the understanding of the apostle, is a message, but not one that simply conveys information; it is a message that triggers the saving act of an all-powerful and all-righteous God on behalf of all who believe. And yes, before I forget, this faith, this belief, is an aspect of utter importance. It was quite clear for the apostle that even an all-powerful and an all-righteous God would not force his salvation, his pardon on the sinner. His offer of a free salvation in Christ, requires an answer. That answer is faith: faith that is awakened by the hearing of the gospel, but faith that has to be exercised from first to last, from the very incipient stages of the Christian life to the very end of it. As in the old oracle of the prophet Habakkuk, "the righteous shall live by faith." Faith is a response to the most generous offer ever given to mankind, the offer of a gospel written in blood, an offer made by an all powerful and all righteous loving God, an offer that would be enormously and eternally regretted if rejected.

Tertius (a.k.a. Radu Gheorghiiã)

Well, now that we read what Tertius might have remembered from writing Paul's most famous epistle, I wonder what Paul himself would have written about the gospel if he were asked to contribute an article to the *Midwestern Journal of Theology*. Let me suggest a few possibilities.

1. I am certain that he would not have altered the gospel he preached; as in the beginning of his ministry to its very end, the gospel remained the invariable message of Paul's apostleship.

2. Moreover, he would have not lost an opportunity to test us, the believers, to see how well we have understood this message and how well we apply it. He would probe to find if perhaps there might be among his readers those who walk on the path of self-sufficiency and self-righteousness, those who might still believe that they are good enough for heaven, that they deserve or merit the salvation, that while Christ had to die for most, they themselves were in no need of that sacrifice. I am sure that Paul would have wasted no time in addressing the issue and making them aware of the awful danger of such a position. For indeed, if salvation could be won by our merits, Christ has died in vain.

3. He would have also probed to see whether some among us, while believing that justification is an act of God by faith, think that sanctification is an act of our own doing. To them he would have asked the question, "Having started well by faith, now you want to complete your Christian journey by your own power? How foolish!" he would

have said. For indeed, if sanctification could be attained by our own efforts, the Spirit had been given to us in vain.

4. He would have also talked to those who believe that if we are saved by faith and not by works, we are consequently saved apart from works. “Works do not matter whatsoever,” they would say. To them who rely too easily on a momentous decision to accept Christ, he would remind them that accepting Christ as Savior makes sense only in as much as it results in following Christ as Lord. For indeed, if this was not the case, we have been crucified with Christ in vain.

5. He would have also talked to those who, deep down inside, think that they are too sinful for such an act of love and forgiveness, to those that think that they are too far gone for the grace of God to reach them. He would probably try tenderly to persuade them that God would not have given his Son if he had entertained any doubts that he could reach even the most rebel heart, that he could forgive even the grossest sin, or that he could heal even the most broken life. Indeed, God’s love is not limited. But if you believe that his love is limited, if you believe, either because of down-heartedness, or, worse still, because of arrogance, that God’s love and sacrifice are not for you, you will in vain both live and die eternally.

6. And right before he departed he would have reminded us all, one more time, that “the one who is righteous by faith shall live by faith.”