

MULTIPLYING LOCAL CHURCHES BY TRUSTING A SOVEREIGN GOD 2 Corinthians 4:1-6

INTRODUCTION

Each Sunday in the Janesville Gazette you will find pictures of smiling couples announcing their engagement to be married and pictures of smiling couples who have recently been married. Later in the week, in the Gazette, you will find a list of couples who were recently divorced in the Rock County Courthouse. Every single one of those divorced couples has a wedding book full of smiling pictures. Every single one of those divorced couples at one time had hearts full of love for each other that prompted them to make promises to always love, honor and cherish each other. What happened? In every case either one or both of the partners in the relationship decided that what it was costing to stay married was not being made up for by the benefits being received. In short, someone in the marriage decided that the dividends of pleasure were not great enough to offset the debts of pain.

It is not only married people that lose heart and therefore abandon the relationship but all of us have lost heart in a wide variety of relationships and activities for the same reason. We have all quit doing certain activities or broken off relationships because we have become discouraged by the lack of results, the dearth of benefits and/or the large quantity of cost involved in persisting. I want you to notice that the apostle Paul in v. 1 of our text this morning declares that he does not lose heart, he does not grow discouraged in the ministry he has been given by God. What is the ministry to which he refers?

Look back to 2:12 and trace with me his description of that ministry which God gave to him as an expression of his mercy. He describes a particular moment in his life when he came to the city of Troas, a port city in the Roman province of Asia. He says he came there to preach the gospel of Christ. The ministry God gave to him was the task of declaring the good news that God is willing to give a pardon to every rebel human who will rely solely upon Jesus Christ as the one who lived and died to pay the penalty for his or her rebellion against God. Now notice how he continues to describe his ministry. Even though he had much opportunity to preach in Troas he did not because he didn't find his co-worker Titus there and so he left. Even though he did not preach the gospel in Troas yet God is spreading through Paul and all other preachers of the gospel an aroma, a fragrance which is the knowledge of Christ. The fragrance of Christ in the gospel is the smell of life to those who are being saved and it is the putrid smell of death to those who are perishing. So everywhere Paul goes there are people who are attracted to him like people are attracted to a sweet smelling apple tree or the smell of perfume. At the same time there are others who are repelled by him and find him disgusting because to them he smells like the decaying flesh of dead animals. Paul asks, who is sufficient or adequate for such things? How can it be that a mere human being by declaring this message arouses such powerful and contradictory responses in people? How is it possible for a human to do this?

Now look down to 3:4-6. Here again, he talks about sufficiency. He says that he is confident in this ministry God has given him not because of who he is but because of who has given him this ministry and because of what this ministry is. God makes him sufficient to be a minister, a servant of the new covenant. The new covenant is the promise God makes to forgive his people their sins and to declare them perfectly righteous in his sight and to preserve them by the Spirit through faith and so to bring them safely into the new heavens and the new earth in resurrected, immortal bodies not because of anything we have ever done or decided but entirely because of what Jesus, the Son of God has done for us by his perfect life, willing death and glorious resurrection. That is what Paul means when he says that he is a minister of the new covenant. It is his job to declare the mighty work of God in Christ for everyone who believes. In 3:6-18 he shows the superiority and glory of this new covenant in contrast to the old covenant he made with Israel on Mt. Sinai through Moses.

Thus in 4:1, when he says that he does not lose heart he is simply restating with a negation what he said positively in 3:4 that he is full of confidence. He persists in preaching the gospel of Christ, no matter what, because by his preaching God is spreading the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ everywhere. He persists because by his preaching God the HS is transforming sinners into the image of Christ himself. The question however is this: why would Paul be tempted to quit, to give up preaching the gospel, declaring the new covenant God has made with his people in and through Christ? The reason is because it is not a pleasant experience when people think you stink like rotting meat. When people find you disgusting they treat you bad. They try to kill you or throw you into prison or slander you or beat you up and betray you or generally make your life very unpleasant. Also, as we know from what Jesus said in Matthew 7:13-14, far more people are going to think you stink than think you smell good. It will often feel like you are wasting your time because so many people will be opposing you.

In this passage Paul tells us that the reason he persists in faithfully declaring the word of God without changing it and without trickery is because he is 100% confident that the God who mercifully gave him this ministry is a sovereign God. To say that God is sovereign is to say what the psalmist says in 135:6, "The Lord does whatever pleases him in the heavens and on the earth in the seas and all their depths." God has the right and the power to do whatever makes him happy. Or to say it the way Psalm 33:10-11 says it, "The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations." Or as Paul says in Ephesians 1:11, God is the one "who works out all things according to the purpose of his will." There is not a random molecule in the entire universe. Everything that happens in this universe happens according to the will and purpose of God. He directs all things to his predetermined end. Nothing and no one can successfully resist his will. We are going to see in this passage that it is the fact that God is sovereign that is the reason that Paul never quits preaching the gospel. It doesn't matter how people respond to him, he will not quit preaching the gospel because he is 100% convinced that everyone whom God intends to save will be saved by this means.

We are in the midst of series examining the means by which God sustains and multiplies local churches so that all of his people are gathered into the body of Christ. We saw last week that it is by the faithful proclamation of the whole word of God that God sustains and multiplies his church. Here again, Paul makes clear that the main thing every local church is supposed to be doing is "setting forth the truth plainly" or "preaching Jesus as Lord." But also, Paul tells us that the only reason he is confident and does not lose heart in this work of preaching is because God is sovereign in all things, especially in the salvation of his people through his word. So we will look at three reasons from this passage as to why it is that only a sovereign God can save sinners and multiply churches.

MAIN POINT

Only a sovereign God can save sinners and multiply churches because...

I. All humans are willingly blind and blinded to God's glory (vv.3-4)

In vv. 3-4 Paul, in a few, concise words, describes the fundamental problem that infects the universe and makes it hard to continue preaching the gospel. We live in a world that has been cursed by God, is ruled over by Satan and in which men delight in evil, rather than good. It is not Paul's purpose in these two verses to work out the relationship between God's sovereignty, Satan's power to deceive and human responsibility. He simply states that these three forces are at work in the world and the result is that human beings are blind to the glory of Christ.

In v. 3 Paul is saying what Jesus said in Matthew 11:25, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children." It is God's will that those who perish remain blind to the glory of Christ. God is under no obligation to save anyone. He is free to save whom he will. I know this sounds unjust. Paul in Romans 9 right after asserting God's sovereign choice in choosing to love Jacob while he chose to hate Esau before the twins were born or had done

anything good or bad says this, "What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.'" God is free to be gracious to whom he will because there is no one who deserves to be saved.

In v. 4 Paul is saying what Jesus said in John 8:44-45 to the religious leaders, "You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me!" Satan is the great deceiver. He deceived Adam and Eve at the beginning and he continues to deceive humans to this day. He is out to convince us that God cannot be trusted to make us happy. He seeks to persuade us that anything and everything is more trustworthy and satisfying than the great Triune God. It is Satan's will that all humans remain blind to the great love and mercy of God in Christ. We happily agree with him. We are, in our natural selves, "unbelievers." We delight to trust anything and everything rather than Christ. We cannot see what is blazing in front of our face, the glory of Christ held out in the gospel because we do not want to see it. It is our will, our desire to not see Christ but to demand to be made happy by creation, not the Creator. What we want are secure jobs, full bank accounts, loving spouses, and obedient children not God.

Frankly, the main reason most people struggle with the clear teaching of the Bible that God is sovereign in salvation is because we do not really believe that we are as bad as the Bible says that we are or that we are as helpless as the Bible says we are. In Romans 1 Paul says that though we see the invisible God revealed in the creation, yet we love and are impressed with the creation and not God the creator. It is because of this exchanging of the glory of God for the pleasures of creation that Paul says that all humans have become filled "with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless." In chapter 2 of his letter to the Romans he says that every time we judge others as worthy of God's condemnation we condemn ourselves because we also do the evil we condemn in others. Just listen to the moral judgments you make and then honestly evaluate yourself by your own judgments. I can assure you that if you will do this, you will see your hypocrisy. Paul, in chapter 3 of Romans thus sums up the human condition by quoting a list of statements from the OT: "as it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness....'"

In Romans 8 Paul says about us in our natural condition that we are, in our minds, hostile to God. That is we hate him and his ways. He says we do not submit to God's law, indeed we cannot submit to God's laws and we cannot please him. The point is that in our natural condition we only want to sin. We do not want to do what God tells us to do. We view him as our enemy, someone who is not out for our good. When we hear his law to not love money or to not be angry with others or to give away our possessions to the poor, we hear these commands which God gives to us for our good as unreasonable demands. Thus we have no ability to obey them or to love God. If you command me to love the Chicago Bears and to cheer for them to beat the Green Bay Packers this afternoon, I cannot obey you. I have no ability to love and cheer for the Bears. Why not? Because I hate them and I love the Packers. I want the Bears to lose, not win and so I am only able to cheer when they lose, not when they win. It is the same with us. As we come forth from our mother's womb, we love sin and hate God and thus we cannot love God and obey him.

But someone will say, look at all the people helping the poor in Haiti or look at all the people in Tucson that risked their lives to take down that shooter. Surely it is not true that "no one does good." Surely it is not true that no one has the ability to obey God's laws. If you promised to pay me \$1000 to cheer for the Bears this afternoon, I could cheer for the Bears. However, would I be cheering for them because I loved them? I would be pretending to love the Bears. I would be conforming my external behavior to look like a person who loves the Bears, not because I loved them but because I love money. It is the same with humans in regard to God's law. We do conform our external behavior to God's standards sometimes but we don't do it because we love

him but because we believe we will get some other benefit by our external conformity. We are helpless to change what our heart loves because we do not want to change. Only a sovereign God can do it.

II. Only a sovereign God can make blind people see (v.6)

In v. 5 Paul says that he persists in doing one thing: promoting the glory and sufficiency of Jesus as the Lord of all. In v. 6 he says that the reason he keeps doing this in spite of the fact that so many remain stubbornly blind to his glory is “because the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of the darkness’ has made his light to shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” The first thing Paul calls our attention to is that the God who exists and who sent his son into the world and has made Paul sufficient as a minister of the new covenant is the God who spoke into the darkness of nothingness and by his word created light out of that darkness. The God with whom we are dealing is the God who, from nothing, made everything merely by speaking.

This same God who spoke light into existence out of the darkness of nothingness spoke into the dark, unbelieving, rebellious, deceived, hardened, God-hating heart of Paul and every other believer and when he spoke, he created light out of that darkness. He made the blind to see. He created the sun, that is the gospel of Jesus and he sovereignly gives us the ability to see the sun. Jesus is the light of the world but his light cannot be seen by humans in our natural condition because we don’t want to see him and because we are blinded by the devil. However, God overcomes all of our resistance and overcomes the deception of the devil and gives us eyes to see the sun. Thus if you see the beauty and glory of Jesus, then you can know it is because God has, by that same power that enabled him to create light out of darkness, spoken into your heart and made you see what was always blazing before your eyes. The problem is not that Jesus is not glorious but that we are blind. You cannot heal yourself of your blindness. Only a sovereign God can heal you.

Paul is holding himself up as an example and appropriately so. He is reflecting upon what happened to him. The story of Paul’s conversion in Acts 8 confirms that God never saves anyone because of anything they have ever done. God did not choose Paul because he saw something good in Paul. Paul, by his own admission, was a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man. He hated Christ and he hated Christ’s people. There was absolutely no way that he could “cheer” for Jesus because he was convinced that Jesus was an imposter and that Christianity was a blight upon God’s good name. God took the initiative to confront and save Paul. Paul says that God shone into my heart when he confronted me on the road to Damascus. He shone into my heart through sending to me a simple Christian man, named Ananias. He came to me in spite of his fear of me. He knew that I hated Christ and Christians and yet, for the sake of Christ and out of his love for me, he made himself my slave by coming to me and telling me of the gospel of Christ. He exposed himself to danger and at the risk of his own life he told me of Christ. God, in his great mercy, through this humble Christian revealed Christ to me so that I cannot love anything or anyone without reference to Jesus.

Parents, here is the reason to keep being a slave to your children by denying yourself in order to give them the gospel. No matter how resistant they may appear to that gospel, God is able to speak into their hearts and make them see. Here is the reason that every small group leader should be a slave to his or her small group by teaching the bible because God will give light to dark hearts by this means. Here is the reason we should pursue planting other churches in Rock County because God aims to save all of his people through our proclamation of Christ by speaking into dark hearts so that they will be able to see the glory of Christ. The only reason to take the risk to tell someone else the good news of Jesus is because God is sovereign. As you set the glory of Christ before another human being by telling of the great love of God in Christ for sinners you can do so with confidence because God is able to speak light into the darkness of that human heart to whom you are speaking and make the person able to see the glory which you are describing.

III. Salvation is seeing and savoring the glory of God in Christ (v.6)

The final reason why it is only a sovereign God who can save sinners and multiply churches is because of what salvation is. Notice in v. 4 what cannot be seen by humans in their natural condition is “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” Then in v. 6 what God enables us to see when he speaks light into our hearts is “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” Most people think of salvation as simply having sins forgiven so I can go to heaven in the future. However, here, as elsewhere in the Bible salvation is described as an ability to see the light which is the glory of God in the face of Christ as he is revealed in the gospel. What Christ did by his death and resurrection was to make it just for God to send his HS who enables us to see and savor the beauty of God in the person of Jesus. All that we can know about the invisible God is revealed to us in the person of Jesus. Jesus died and rose so that we can see and rejoice in God himself as he is revealed to us in Christ. To know and to see the glory of God in Christ means not simply that we trust in Christ as our savior but that we have a new passion planted in us to rejoice in God himself.

I reread the first couple of chapters to John Piper’s book “Desiring God” this week and he describes so well what Paul is saying here. If you have not read his book I strongly urge you to do so. Listen to what he says, “Once we had no delight in God and Christ was just a vague historical figure. What we enjoyed was food and friendships and productivity and investments and vacations and hobbies and games and reading and shopping and sex and sports and TV and travel... but not God. He was an idea—even a good one—and a topic of discussion; but he was not a treasure of delight. Then something miraculous happened. It was like the opening of the eyes of the blind during the golden dawn. First the stunned silence before the unspeakable beauty of holiness. Then a shock and terror that we had actually loved the darkness. Then the settling stillness of joy that this is the soul’s end. The quest is over. We would give anything if we might be granted to live in the presence of this glory forever and ever.... What was once distasteful or bland is now craved. Christ himself has become a treasure chest of holy joy. The tree of faith grows only in the heart that craves the supreme gift that Christ died to give: not health, not wealth, not prestige, but God.”

You and I cannot manufacture this affection for, this delight in God revealed in Christ. It is a work of the HS. It is the work of a sovereign God who speaks his light into our hearts. This is the work of which God speaks through his prophet Ezekiel which was read for us earlier: “I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules... and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. And I will deliver you from all your uncleanness.” While we cannot give ourselves new hearts we can cry out to God to have mercy upon us and for the sake of his own great name to speak light into our dark hearts. We can confess to him the darkness that is in us and give attention to his word and promises in the gospel. We cannot give this new heart to anyone else. But we can pray for God to take out hearts of stone and give hearts of flesh, to speak light into dark hearts. We can faithfully commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God by setting forth the truth of God plainly. We can work to take this gospel outside the walls of our church and to establish more churches in Rock County where this gospel will be faithfully preached and where Christians will seek to serve the non-Christians around them in order to give them this gospel.

It is God’s will and his purpose to create more worshippers in Rock County. He is going to sovereignly enable blind people whose hearts are full of darkness to see the light of the glory of God in the face of Christ. However, he is only going to do it as people have that glory set before them in the gospel of Jesus. It is only as people hear with their physical ears this good news of a crucified and resurrected Savior that God will give them spiritual ears to truly hear and eyes to truly see and a heart to truly love the blazing light of God’s glory in the gospel. Thus we can be full of bold confidence to plan for and plant other churches in Rock County because nothing and no one can stop our sovereign God from overcoming the darkness of human hearts to create white hot worshippers of God.

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