

Come and Help Us

Acts 15:36–16:10

January 6, 2002

“A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing beseeching him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ And when he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.”

The most obvious good news in today’s reading is contained in this realization that God calls particular ministers to preach the gospel to particular congregations. This means that God is in charge of the universe. It means that God has entered into, and is active in, human history. It means that God is involved in your life and mine. We are not left to our own devices. God provides for the preaching of the gospel in particular times and places.

We can get very specific with this by extension of the example in this reading. A man’s voice came to me by telephone early in the afternoon: a member of the Pastor Nominating Committee said, “Come up to Richmond and help us.” We concluded that God had called us to preach the gospel to you. It is my intent to obey his call.

Moreover, there may be others in this congregation and in this very sanctuary today whom God is calling into the gospel ministry. There are seminary students here. And there are young men and women, boys and girls, whom God might be calling into the ministry. Listen to the calling! There is nothing more important you can do with your life.

We can also get very general with this. God has called you to your various life works. God has called you to be here. God has called you to be Christian. At this level, this passage confirms that God has called us together, and we are grateful for that.

There is a deeper level of good news here. Underneath God’s calling of people to preach, there is the conviction, the reality, and the realization that preaching actually helps people. “A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing beseeching him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’” It does not say who the man was. It is conceivable, I suppose, that the man in the vision was a preacher himself, and that he was asking Paul to help him preach. But even if that were true, and I do not believe that it is, there is a deeper meaning here.

The truth is that the people in Macedonia needed help. The truth is that the people in Richmond, Virginia, need help. We need more help than the government can give. We need more help than society can give. We need more help than the schools can give. We need more help than money can give. We need more help than family can give. We need more help than the police can give. We need more help than the military can give. We need help. We need the help that only God can give. And God gives us help through the preaching of the gospel of his Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

The deep problem of human life and the human condition is the one to which Jesus is the answer. Our greatest problems are not social, economic, political, or military, as severe as those may be. Our greatest problem is our alienation from God and from each other, and that is what Jesus came to solve. This is the help for which the man in the vision was asking.

Christ died to take away our sin, our brokenness, our alienation from God and from each other. Christ was raised again so that we might live with God forever. This is the help we need. This is the help we receive in the preaching of the gospel. Thanks be to God.

Is that the end of it all? No. Sometimes it may seem to be. I have been forgiven, I have been saved, Alleluia! That is that. But no, that is not that. That is not the end of the Christian life. That is the beginning of the Christian life. The help which God gives to us through the preaching of the gospel of his son is not just momentary help. It is help that lasts for an eternity. It is help that reclaims us as God's very own. It is help that remakes us into new creatures. It is our daily bread, now and forever.

Our reading tells what happened when churches received the help of God in the preaching of the gospel. "So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily." And this came after what, from the human perspective, seemed to be a terrible split in the leadership of the churches. Paul and Barnabas disagreed about who could minister with whom. Barnabas thought John Mark was fine, but Paul was not going to have anything to do with him. Soon they went their separate ways. But far from crippling the early church, this division doubled their outreach and mission.

At any rate, "the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily." It is appropriate that churches grow in faith and number, in spirit and in strength, as a direct result of, and response to, the preaching of the gospel. How is it that this seems strange to us at the beginning of the twenty-first century? How is it that after thirty-five years of decline on the national level, church growth seems such a foreign concept to Presbyterians?

On Friday, January 4, 2002, it was announced that Service Merchandise is going out of business. Analysts said that the discount store had cut its prices so low that it put itself out of business. The company did not generate enough profit to put any money back into the business to keep the business going. Then it hit me: is the church in danger of the same fate?

I am not talking about sales and profits. I am talking about what happens to human relationships and institutions when expectations are so low that we ask for nothing, and then we receive nothing. Relationships fail. Institutions fade away. Families dissolve. Cities deteriorate. Maybe there are some people burdened with high expectations which exceed their abilities, though often that causes people to strive and so to achieve. But how many more people are there from whom nothing is ever expected, nothing is ever asked, and nothing is ever received? And has not the church of Jesus Christ in general, and the Presbyterian Church in particular, led the way in lowering expectations, especially of members? The results have been calamitous.

It comes from a gross misunderstanding of the grace of God. Yes, grace is free, but it costs us everything. There is nothing we can do to earn salvation, but salvation claims all that we are, all that we do, and all that we have. God's love is not simply unconditional but is instead all conditioning. God's love comes to us while we are yet sinners, and once it gets hold of us, it never lets go. God does not ask that we do anything to deserve to be forgiven, but God's forgiveness asks that we do everything in response.

This is where we have fallen down. We have forgotten the second half of God's grace. The church has lost its nerve. After all, people are busy. We do not want to bother them. We do not want to scare them away. So we will seek nothing, ask nothing, expect nothing, and be surprised when that is what we get. The Presbyterian Church has been scared to invite people to church; they know where we are, let them come if they want to. The Presbyterian Church has been scared into using the Little Bo Peep theory of evangelism for college students: Leave them alone and they will come home. It does not work. The Presbyterian Church has been scared to invite visitors to join; it is okay just to visit, we do not want to be pushy. The Presbyterian Church has been scared to ask its own members to come to church; after all, people have to go to

ball games and outings and all those important things. And do you know what has happened as a result of lowered expectations? Very few people have visited Presbyterian churches, very few of those visitors have joined Presbyterian churches, and very few of those members attend Presbyterian churches. Are we, because of this, going to follow Service Merchandise in going out of business?

My answer to this is, “Not on my watch!” “Not on my watch!” If we have misunderstood the grace of God, it is high time that we start correctly understanding the grace of God. If Jesus Christ gave his life in order to reclaim us as his own, it is high time that we start living as if we were his very own, which we are. If the church in our lifetime has not asked enough of us, let that never be the case again. We want your heart. We want your soul. We want your mind. We want your strength. We want all that you are and all that you have, in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Do you love God a little? We want you to love God a lot, with all your heart, and to love God’s church, too, the same way. Is your soul sort of committed to God? We want total commitment to God and to God’s church. Do you treat faith as that which is beyond understanding? We want you to use your mind to grapple with the faith, to seek understanding, and to take every thought captive to Christ. Do you neglect your duty to God and seek your own well-being? We will call on you to use your strength and your resources to serve God Almighty, by whom and for whom they were created, and to serve God’s church, into which he has called us. Do you give God a little, or even a lot? We will call on you at least to tithe to God’s church, and to make an offering worthy of the sacrifice of Christ for us.

If you are listening to us on the radio, we invite you to come to church. If you are visiting here with us today, we invite you to join. And if you are a member, we invite you to come every Sunday, and to bring others with you. And what is more, we invite members, visitors, and hearers to an ever deepening commitment to God, to his Christ, and to his church. God’s help is not for one day only. He is calling us for eternity, and we want to respond appropriately.

God has given us everything, and he expects a lot in return. The church has suffered a loss of nerve. The church has thought that the best strategy would be to expect little. But the church has been wrong, for our lowered expectations have yielded nothing. So let us repent, and let us be the church which God calls us to be.

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To God and to the Lord Jesus Christ be the glory now and forever! Amen.

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