

# For the Sake of the Faith

Isaiah 55:6-13, Titus 1:1-4 (ESV)

February 19, 2006

The Apostle Paul, whatever his faults, whatever his flaws, whatever his shortcomings, never lacked for confidence in the reality of his calling to be an apostle and never lacked for confidence in the reality of the content of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And for this we are grateful, considering that, humanly speaking, Paul more than any other was responsible for preaching the gospel beyond Jerusalem, around the Mediterranean Sea, and across the Roman Empire, so that it has reached even us today, and that, as a part of his pastoral ministry, Paul wrote the several letters we have which make up a great deal of the New Testament, recording the gospel of Jesus Christ so that it has reached even us today.

Again, whatever his faults, whatever his flaws, whatever his shortcomings, and I would have to suppose they were many, the Apostle Paul never lacked for confidence in the reality of his calling to be an apostle or in the content of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And when he was attacked on either count, either his calling or the gospel, as he often was, he was never hesitant to insist upon both the reality of his calling and the content of the gospel. For the two go together, you see. The two necessarily go together. It is only because Paul was truly called that he was able to preach the gospel at all. And it was precisely in order to preach that he was called and made an apostle. That is to say, not only was an attack upon the gospel he preached an attack upon his calling and ministry, which may not seem so important to us, especially at this distance, and we tend to think that nobody is above reproach, so that maybe he should get over it, but also, the other way around, any attack upon his calling and his authority was necessarily an attack upon his preaching, and therefore an attack upon the content of the gospel, and therefore a rejection of the good news of Jesus Christ.

This is the piece of the equation that was so extraordinarily important to Paul then and, by extension, continues to be so important to us yet today. We have received the faith today in great part because he defended it so vigorously then. It was not simply the case that Paul was arrogant or self-important. Many people have misunderstood this. It was instead the case that God had called Paul to tell the world about Jesus Christ. And no one could take that away from Paul. There were other preachers. There were other teachers. There were other apostles. But to deny the content of the gospel would be to say that Paul's calling was false, and also, the other way around, perhaps even more importantly, and certainly more insidiously, to

say that Paul's calling was false was also to deny the gospel of Jesus Christ. The two necessarily go together.

I have emphasized this, and perhaps overemphasized it, in order to help us all to appreciate Paul's extraordinary self-identification included in the opening of this letter, to appreciate it as the very proclamation of the gospel even to us yet today, and not simply to dismiss it as some overinflated expression of his own importance. Presumably, he could have begun the letter simply, "Paul, to Titus: Hello!" That should have been sufficient. As long as the letter carrier knew where the island of Crete was, and as long as he could find a minister there named Titus, and considering that there were not too many people named Paul who would have been writing Titus, that should have been sufficient. "Paul, to Titus: Hello!" That is more of a greeting than I receive on some letters today.

The fact that Paul used a longer self-identification means that he did not regard the shorter form as sufficient. Then we have to ask why it was not sufficient. And given that Titus would have known all of this about Paul, it seems that this additional material is important not only to identify Paul but also to establish his authority and to confirm the gospel and therefore to assist Titus in the struggle against those disturbing the government of the church and attacking the doctrine of the Christian faith. Maybe that can be of help to us. Paul sets forth, in these few words, the foundation upon which the whole rest of the letter is based. Instead of waiting until the body of the letter proper, he makes his main point right from the beginning, so we do well not to hurry past it:

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior.

There is so much here! Let us begin at the beginning and go to the end, to the goal of eternal life. First, "God promised...before the ages began." God promised what is now the content of the gospel. God promised salvation. God promised eternal life. God decreed it before time. God promised it to Abraham centuries before Christ: "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). The basis of the gospel, the basis of our faith, the basis of salvation, the basis of our very lives is the sheer promise of God, the word of God, the will of God, the commitment of God, the very determination of God. The gospel is not based on our wishfulness. The gospel is not based on our neediness. The gospel is not based on

our wants and desires. The gospel is not based on our imagination. The gospel is not based on our goodness, on our intelligence, on our wits, or on our deservingness. Instead, the gospel is based on the promise of God. Thanks be to God! There is no possible better foundation.

Second, the God who “promised...before the ages began” is also the God who “never lies.” God never lies. God is the God of truth. We will come back to that in a moment. Lying is against his nature. God never lies. What this means for us yet today is that what he says is dependable. We can count upon what he promises. Let me say that again: We can count upon what he promises. That is the basis of all that is good in human life. Preaching, at its best, is the announcement of the promises of God. His promises are good news. His promises are gospel. It is by his promises that we live. It is by his promises that we breathe. It is by his promises that we believe. It is by his promises that we are healed. It is by his promises that we are forgiven. It is by his promises that we are made whole. God does not speak in vain. And he never lies.

Third, the God who “promised...before the ages began,” the God who “never lies,” also “at the proper time manifested” his promise “in his word.” “At the proper time” Jesus Christ came into the world. “At the proper time” he was born in Bethlehem. “At the proper time” he lived and taught, he ministered and healed, he preached and performed miracles. “At the proper time” he “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell.” “At the proper time” on “the third day he rose again from the dead.” “At the proper time” “he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” That has all been accomplished. And “at the proper time” “from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.” In the goodness and wisdom and providence of God, it has all happened “at the proper time,” in the fullness of time, in God’s good time. Thanks be to God!

Fourth, the God who “promised...before the ages began,” who “never lies,” and who “at the proper time manifested” his promise “in his word,” did so “through the preaching with which I [Paul] have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior.” It is not only the case that Jesus Christ came and went and will come again. It is also the case that in the meantime the church has been given the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is no mean gift. Why is preaching important to us? Preaching is important to us because the church lives by the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Where there is no preaching of the gospel, there is no church. Where the gospel is preached and creates a hearing for itself, there the church exists. Where the gospel is preached and heard, there the church is built up. Thus, the church does not live by liturgy, program, emotion, self-will, or its own strength or fellowship, but only, only, only by the preaching of the gospel. Nor does the

church depend upon the preacher of the gospel, as such, but upon the gospel that is preached. This means that the single most important thing the church can do is to provide for the faithful, energetic, passionate, and winsome preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, every Sunday.

In the particulars of today's reading, God "manifested" his promise "in his word through the preaching with which I [Paul] have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior." That is to say, there is a direct link from the promise of God to Paul's preaching of the gospel, and this direct link has been established not by Paul's birth or standing or education or hard work but directly by the sheer command of God. It is because God says so. It is because God says it is. Again, the significance of this is that to reject the preaching and teaching of Paul is to reject nothing less than the promise of God. That would be a terrible thing. And yet, I have heard people in our own day say that they know better than Paul. I have heard people in our own day belittle Paul as dated, ignorant, and worse. I have heard people in our own day dismiss Paul as misogynist and homophobic. I have heard people in our own day fail to appreciate the direct, God-established link between the preaching of Paul and the promises of God so that they have thought they could reject Paul with impunity. I suspect that is a bad strategy. Paul was accustomed to such detractors in his own day. What he wrote to warn them continues to stand as a vital warning to us yet today.

Fifth, the God who "promised...before the ages began," who "never lies," who "at the proper time manifested" his promise "in his word through the preaching with which I [Paul] have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior" also by that command determined that Paul would be "a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ." Paul would be both "a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ." John Calvin writes of this passage that the role of servant here indicated for Paul is not the general servanthood to which all Christians are called but is a high and holy office, a special and particular calling, a specific ministry. Paul here immediately names that ministry, of course, "an apostle of Jesus Christ." There are many preachers, but there were few apostles. An apostle was one chosen by God and entrusted with authority in preaching the gospel and teaching the faith. Paul reminds his readers that he is an apostle not because he wants to lord it over them. He did not ask to be an apostle! Paul reminds his readers that he is an apostle because he has been entrusted with the gospel of salvation so that for them to reject him and the gospel would be for them to forfeit their salvation. This has nothing to do with Paul's pride. This has to do with eternity. It did then. And it still does now.

Sixth, the God who "promised...before the ages began," who "never lies," who "at the proper time manifested" his promise "in his word through the preaching with which I [Paul] have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior," and

who determined that Paul would be “a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ,” did so “for the sake of the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth.” For the sake of the faith! This is what it is all about! For the sake of the faith! Again, it was not for Paul. It was for the sake of the faith of God’s elect, then and now and for all time, for them and so even for us. All of this was “for the sake of the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth.” John Calvin, again, writing of this passage, interprets “the faith of God’s elect” and “their knowledge of the truth” to be the same thing. That is to say, faith is knowledge of the promises and benevolence of God. And knowledge of the promises and benevolence of God as made known in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is Christian faith. So, faith is not believing what we do not know. That is not Christian faith. Christian faith is believing what we do know in Jesus Christ, that God has made us for himself, that God has come to us in Jesus Christ, that God has provided for our salvation. We know that. We know that, and so we believe it.

Conversely, where there is no knowledge of the truth, there is no Christian faith. I was in a small group meeting recently, not here, where we were discussing the speakers’ presentations, and I made a statement of the Christian faith. Someone responded, “That’s your truth.” “That’s your truth.” I almost came out of my chair. If truth is divided between you and me, then there is no truth. And if there is no truth, there is no Christian faith. If there is no truth, there is no gospel. If there is no truth, there is no God. God is the God of truth. I told you we would come back to that. God never lies. God is always true. To deny truth is to deny God. And to diminish truth as merely subjective is certainly to deny the existence of truth at all. Nothing could be more pernicious or insidious. And yet, nothing is more common in our day.

Seventh, Paul was “a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness.” That is to say, Christian faith and knowledge are to be expressed in a life of holiness. A lack of godliness betrays a lack of faith and knowledge. It has never been the case that the purpose of the gospel was simply to condone what we were already doing and to encourage us to continue in our old ways. Instead, the very purpose of the gospel has been to lead us to faith and knowledge in order to lead us into a life of godliness and of the right worship of God.

Eighth and finally, Paul was “a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life.” There is the goal! There is the purpose of it all! There is the content of the promise of salvation! The hope of eternal life! Life here is hard. Disease, decay, decline, and death are our enemies. But they shall not have the last word about us! We do not belong to them! They

shall not claim the victory! We belong to God! Our God has promised us eternal life. He has provided for that in Jesus Christ. He extends it to us even today in the preaching of the gospel. Is eternal life of interest to you? I will close with the words of the prophet Isaiah

Seek the Lord while he may be found;  
call upon him while he is near;  
let the wicked forsake his way,  
and the unrighteous man his thoughts;  
let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him,  
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

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