

# HAVE TRUTH, WILL TRAVEL

by Steve Zeisler

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I had the privilege this week of watching a family as I was shopping. I didn't know them, but it was delightful to observe the two little girls in this family, who appeared to be about four and two. The two-year-old was trying to do everything her older sister did. And the older girl was having the time of her life running her little sister's affairs, giving directions and confidently making pronouncements about what ought to happen at various stations along the way, striding purposefully from place to place, and glancing over her shoulder at the longing of her little sister to be as grown up as a four-year-old some day.

As I enjoyed watching these two, it struck me that there may not be a more confident person in the world than a four-year-old girl who is being followed by her two-year-old sister. Most of the people I know (anyone much beyond four) have received some blows to their confidence. We are less sure that we know what we are doing. We have failed at some things, and we don't have the adoring gaze of a little sister to reinforce our confidence.

Let's consider where confidence comes from. What does it mean to be able to live life knowing who you are and where you're going, to have a sure stance, energy, direction, and peace? I'm not talking about hollow self-promotion or defensively pretending to be impressed with yourself. I'm talking about having a true sense of godly self-confidence and purpose in life. That is a great gift. In the apostle Paul's words in Romans 15 we will be given some helpful insight as to where true confidence comes from. Verses 14-19:

I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another. I have written you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done---by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ.

Paul is looking back over his life and reflecting on it. Self analysis is characteristic of the apostle, declaring the insight he has learned from the life he has lived.

## **The Basis for Confidence**

In our passage he makes a wonderful statement that is central to his expression of confidence: "Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me...." The phrase "I glory" could be translated "I boast." He is enthusiastic about the life he has lived. He has a great degree of purpose, direction, peace, and confidence; and we will see it displayed before us. He can be very certain of his step, planning vigorously for the future and appreciating the past as he looks back on it. The reason for all of that is that he is completely convinced that the Lord is at work in his life (even though there are things he sees that by human standards might deserve censure or questioning). And I suggest that this is the only real basis for confidence by which any of us can live our lives from here on. The Lord is at work in us, and for that reason we can be bold.

## **Praise and Correction**

In verse 14 this kind of confidence or boldness in knowing that the Lord is at work has a very important aspect for us to consider. Paul praises the Roman Christians for three things: "I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another." First, he is saying, "Your character is one that is genuinely, intrinsically good, measured by any standard. That is, there is in you goodness that comes from God himself." He sees into their character, and he delights in what he sees as real righteousness and goodness of heart.

And they are wise and knowledgeable. "You are completely knowledgeable," he says. This is an amazing statement. Having grasped the essentials of the gospel they have enough knowledge to face anything there is to face in life---danger, temptation, relationships, excitement, loss, joys, and sorrows.

He goes on to say, "You are able to instruct one another." They can have the ministry he is having as a teacher with each other. He expects them to remind, praise, correct, and encourage each other. This is a wonderful affirmation that the apostle gives. And one of the hallmarks of godly confidence is that we can see in other people positives that they may be unsure of for themselves.

But he goes on to add another point in this discussion with the Roman Christians: "I have written you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again..." He has written some hard things in this letter. He has had to challenge them to learn to love one another more faithfully, so that the Jews and Greeks with their historic antagonism for each other will forbid those rifts to exist in the church in Rome. Yet the fact that he has had to remind them that they must love sincerely, that they must treat government authorities with respect, that they must owe no debt to anyone except the universal debt to love everyone, is not at all out of phase with his appreciation of them.

We can genuinely and from the heart appreciate our brothers and sisters, see good in them be open to learn from them, and build up their strengths and their gifts. At the same time we can speak boldly when we need to---say the hard things when it's important, bring the challenges when necessary. If both are true in the Christian community we live in, then we have found the place that Paul has come to in his life: this godly confidence. More often it's true, isn't it, that we tend to praise people with a kind of shallowness. We say pretty things to each other instead of true things. Or we tend to be critical, and never have a word of praise. But like the apostle who is writing to us, the confident man is free to do both: to be filled with praise for those before him, and be willing to say necessary negatives.

I was watching the Stanford-Oregon basketball game last night, sitting right behind the Oregon bench. It was interesting to watch the coach at work. Somebody called a time-out and the team gathered around. He was almost apoplectic. His face was red. The band was playing right in his ear, so he had to scream as loud as he could. He was pointing fingers at his players, and he was as mad as a wet hen. About three minutes later, there was another time-out, and he was hugging them, sitting them down, shaking their hand, and encouraging them. I realized that he probably did both deliberately. He wasn't really as mad as he appeared to be to begin with, but he recognized that there were times when as a coach he had to say the difficult, challenging things. And there were other times when he had to remind them that he cared for them and believed in them, and they could do it. We should learn to do both as well.

### **Surrounded by the Greater Things**

Verses 15-16: "...Because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit." This is another beautiful metaphor of spiritual leadership---the ministry of a priest.

A priest in Israel was surrounded by elements of grave significance. But he himself was not so important. He stood in the presence of the people of God, whose lives and eternity were in the balance, who were worried over their sins, bringing offerings to God, longing to be free from guilt and sin and to be approved by God. These were the beloved of the Lord, the sheep of his hand. The priest also stood before the Holy One, in the presence of God himself. He would represent the people to the Lord; then he would turn back and represent

the Lord to the people. He would handle the sacrifice. He would communicate the congregation's need to God, and God's approval to them. Mostly he was a conduit; his role was to carry messages both directions.

I read of a man who served as a translator in some critical negotiations in the Cold War era between representatives of the United States and of the Soviet Union. The translator had no serious responsibility except to make sure that information went back and forth accurately between the groups, that he could say what the Americans wanted to say in effective Russian and vice versa. It was a significant role in one sense, but it was significant primarily because he was a transmitter, not because he originated anything.

That is the way Paul sees himself here. In verse 16, by the grace given to him, he has been called to be a minister of Christ Jesus, proclaiming the gospel of God so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God and sanctified by the Spirit. The trinity is in view here. Paul is surrounded by God and caught up in the great business of seeing people be brought to life, captured by the gospel, changed by it, sanctified by the Spirit, and handed over to the care and keeping of God---an offering being made. He is involved in something that is very important, but it isn't critical for him to put his stamp on it. He is not building an organization that will carry on his name. His role is to be a conduit, a translator, someone who is surrounded by the greater things.

That is an attitude that gives us confidence. We don't need to worry about our place in the scheme of things, about whether we get credit for what is happening. We don't need to have our contribution cheered and approved or to fear that someone else's contribution will be magnified over ours. None of that needs to take place, because the great thing is the saving and redeeming activity of the Father, Son, and Spirit. We live in God's service. We don't need to worry about whether the vessel is great, because the treasure inside the vessel is so glorious. It is a gift to be given important work, without having to promote our own importance.

### **A Sense of Accomplishment in the Lord**

Verses 17-19: "Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done---by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ." We do not read, "The Lord has done his part and I will do my part---together we make a great team." And he is not saying, "I will glory in nothing except the hard work I have done for the Lord; those moments when I rose to the challenge and did my best for the Lord are what I will boast in." Instead, "What is worth anything in me is what Christ has accomplished through me." Again we have a sense of somebody who is free to be himself because he is confident that there is someone greater than he is who has captured his life and is using it. The Lord is doing his work, and that is what he will boast in. And he will boast in it---he glories in it! He is delighted to be who he is. He is more confident than a four-year-old being watched by her adoring younger sister. He reviews his life, and the reason he is so confident is that he has seen Christ at work.

Paul mentions signs and miracles. Those were the apostolic stamp. In 2 Corinthians 12:12 we read, "The things that mark an apostle---signs, wonders and miracles---were done among you with great perseverance." He is quite sure of who he is and what his gifts are. He has ministered out of his gifts. Both in word and deed, by the miraculous accompaniment to his preaching and his living, and by the power of the Spirit, he has seen lives change.

### **Mission Accomplished**

The phrase that in some ways is the most captivating to me in this section is in verse 19: "I have fully proclaimed [or completely preached] the gospel of Christ." He is thinking geographically, from Jerusalem to Illyricum. Paul was at a critical stage in his life. He was standing on the isthmus between Macedonia and Achaia in the city of Corinth. He could look east in his mind's eye and see the Aegean Sea and Asia Minor and on through Galatia. He could see farther south past Tarsus his hometown and all the way to Jerusalem. He could look north into Macedonia and south to Athens where he had been. He saw churches everywhere. He himself had established many, and those whom he had led to Christ had established more churches. He had both preached and acted. Accompanied by the power of the Spirit, he had seen people come to faith and the

churches built around them. And he knew from the Lord that at this stage of his life, after having been sent out three times on missionary journeys, it was time now to move on. All of the east has been evangelized. And so in Acts 20 when he visits the Ephesians shortly after writing this document, he says to the elders, "You will see my face no more." I am not coming back here. My work in these regions is done.

He is looking on to the west now, as we'll read in just a moment. He looks across the Adriatic and he can see Rome, "the eternal city." All roads lead to Rome, and he anticipates that he himself will come to Rome someday. He looks beyond Rome farther west to Spain. No evangelist has been there yet, and that is where he is going. At this critical stage in his life he can say that because, again, the Lord is at work in him. He is confident that he can make good judgments about who he is and what he ought to do. He is confident as he looks over his life, sums it up to this point, and says, "I have fully preached the gospel. I have finished my work in the east."

It is an extraordinary statement and one that we should aspire to. We should be able to look back at the chapters of our life and draw conclusions about the work God has done in who we are. We should be able to have some awareness of his use of us and his presence in us, be able to announce that it is good, and have a sense of accomplishment in the Lord, that we can see things finished---and then joyfully imagine what could happen next.

Leslie (my wife) and I have been thinking about our life together. Our anniversary is next week, and it is one of the times throughout the year when we tend to think about how things are going and what summary we can make of them. One of the observations we have made is that we are nearing the end of a chapter of our life in terms of child-raising. David, our youngest is still at home and will be for some time. But our two older children within a few months will be largely beyond us. The oldest is in college already, and the second one will be shortly. Everything we have poured into the business of raising those children will soon be completed. What's next Lord, what's the new adventure?

## **Expansion and Unity**

Paul moves on to the future now, having summed up the past, in verses 20-29. He turns west and sees Rome and Spain, and if he had known England existed farther beyond and North America still farther, he would have dreamed of those places.

It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation. Rather, as it is written:

"Those who were not told about him will see,  
and those who have not heard will understand."

This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you.

But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to see you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while. Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings. So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this fruit, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way. I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ.

There were two themes that drove Paul when he considered the future. The first theme was the expansion of the gospel, that the word should go where it hadn't gone before and that people who didn't know Christ should hear about him. He didn't want to work where others had already begun to labor, because in those places where believers already existed they themselves could grow and flourish, lead their friends to Christ,

and touch their communities. He longed to go where no one else had been before.

The other great theme that mattered to him was unity, that the church be one church, not a collection of pods that existed separately from one another. There ought not be division or lack of appreciation for one another. So standing in Corinth, with Jerusalem to the east, Rome and Spain to the west, he says, "First I have to travel to Jerusalem, back to the center of things." He will do that in order to make a contribution of a substantial amount of money that the Gentile believers in Macedonia and Achaia had sacrificially donated to alleviate poverty in Jerusalem. So he longs to see expansion take place, but it is critical to him that the church be one church, and that the roots be honored as well as the branches. It is critical that he establish by his actions that the Jews and Gentiles, the Greeks and Romans, speaking a variety of languages and coming from a variety of cities in the empire, all be one in Christ.

It is important to know our gifts and to see the far horizon and long for it. It is also important, as he says here, to recognize that we have a debt to other people. There are some who have spiritually benefited us. We stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. Someone loved us and prayed for us when we were young, before we knew the Lord. Someone invested their life so that we could have the life we have. One of the great marks of a mature person is gratitude or appreciation. It was very important for these Gentiles to send a gift to Jerusalem, because there were saints there who had paid a great price, both in the Old Testament era and in the early days of the church, so that the Gentile believers in Greece, Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia could have what they had. It is very important for us to express gratitude for those whose lives have benefited us, to say so and to act in ways that demonstrate it.

## **Planning and Surprises**

Regarding expansion, Paul says, "It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known...." And he draws a conclusion from that: He would have been to Rome sooner except that his calling kept getting in the way. He begins this letter in chapter 1 by making some observations. He says in verse 9, "...I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you." Then in verse 13 he says, "I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now)...." And what prevented him from going to Rome was that new territories kept opening up.

For instance, at the end of Paul's second missionary journey, he was on his way back to Antioch, and stopped briefly at Ephesus. Having encountered there many people longing to know the Lord, he realized that this was a territory that he hadn't yet been able to get to, and now the way was open. He might have gone to Rome sooner, but the call was to establish a church in Ephesus as the center of a region where many other churches would be established as well.

Rome didn't need him to come and proclaim the gospel for the first time. So he gave it less priority. The longing, I think, of almost every educated and traveled person in that time and place was to see Rome. Rome was the center of everything; it was the center of political power on earth. It was fascinating, terrible, glorious, and historic. Paul, like everyone else, would have like to have seen it, and intended to some day. He had many friends there. We're going to meet a couple of dozen of them next week in chapter 16. These were people who had traveled with him and with whom he had shared life. They had ended up in Rome, and he wanted to see them. He longed especially to stir up the Romans to have a missionary vision for Spain. There is almost a bit of jab to the ribs in this section; implying, "You've been sitting there in Rome quite awhile. Spain is west of you. Why isn't there a Spanish mission yet? I'm coming, and I'm going to take some of you with me when I come. You're going to send me on my way and support the ministry to Spain."

The planning here is very important. Paul knew his gifts, he knew the Lord within him and was confident that Christ was not going to leave him, and he was grateful for the past. He was therefore able to think strategically about what was to come. It turned out, though, that he was wrong in his plans. He didn't get to drop off the gifts in Jerusalem and then go on to Rome on his way to Spain. Instead he got arrested and spent two years in protective custody in Caesarea. He would finally appeal to Caesar and come to Rome after a shipwreck. And so verse 29 is ironic: "I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ." When he finally arrived in Rome, that statement was exactly right. But it was nothing like what he had

pictured. He came to Rome honored by Christ, but two and a half years late and in chains.

The fact that the unexpected was to happen didn't prevent him, however, from planning. It didn't prevent him from getting on with the work, imagining what might happen, and going for it---and then giving God every right to overturn his plans. Paul was enthusiastic, confident, aggressive, and bold; and yet he was completely at ease when the Lord said no and shut doors and changed directions. He never felt sorry for himself, never whined, never pouted as if the Lord didn't have the right to command his life. This combination, too, seems to me to be a powerful indication that this man had learned what it means to live life caught up with Christ. I will plan with enthusiasm and then I will joyfully give way when my plans don't come about the way I think they ought to.

One of the most remarkable things that came out of Paul's planning and living life, which we can see in retrospect, is that he wrote this letter. It begins with a statement in chapter 1 that he wants to come and see the Romans. It ends now with a description of his plans. He stands in Corinth looking to the west and says, "I would love to come to Rome right now. But I can't because I need to go back to Jerusalem and make sure that Jew and Gentile appreciate one another from the heart. The Jews need to know that their Gentile brothers love them through the gift. The Gentiles need to give the gift so that they can say thank you for the spiritual heritage they have from the Jews. I need to be about the work of unity first. And since I can't come I'm writing this letter."

The most important thing that Paul did, as we know now, is write letters. The churches he founded are gone. The people he evangelized are dead. We have no picture or statue of the man. What he did most importantly for the church in all the generations since then was to write letters. He wrote this letter to explain why he couldn't travel west. And in doing so he composed one of the most extraordinary documents of all time, the book of Romans. This letter time and again in every generation and in every place in the world has stirred people to courageous faith and corrected foolishness. It has brought about reformations, renewal, and freedom. This letter was more important than the trip, even though Paul didn't know that. And in that business, too, the Lord was superintending. God had the great work of the writing of this document for Paul to accomplish.

## **Striving in Prayer**

Verse 30:

I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me.

"Strive with me in prayer," he says. Even in prayer there is a sense of earnestness, boldness, and confidence. Prayers aren't made in a perfunctory manner for this man. We are not to read here, "If you get around to it, say a few prayers." He means these Christians to take prayer, like everything else, seriously.

Verses 31-33:

Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea and that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed. The God of peace be with you all. Amen.

All three of these prayer requests were granted. But they were each granted in a surprising way. He was rescued---after getting beaten up and having his life threatened. He was rescued by the Romans by being placed in custody. But the prayer was answered. The gift was acceptable, although the bringing of the gift resulted in lies that caused violence that in turn led to his beating in Jerusalem. He did come to Rome two-and-a-half years later, after prison and shipwreck. He did come with joy in his heart. And he did come for mutual refreshment. But he hadn't expected it to be the refreshment for a prisoner; he had expected it to be the refreshment for a missionary. In the same way he planned, he was willing to fervently and earnestly pray and then leave the results to God, who answers prayer.

This is one of the personal sections in the Bible where a man of God talks about himself. You get inside the

heart of somebody writing about himself. He evaluates the past, he makes plans for the future, and he strives earnestly in prayer. In all those things we see somebody who knows exactly who he is and where he is going because he knows the one who lives in him. "Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me...."

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Catalog No. 4359  
Romans 15:14-33  
26th Message  
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March 6, 1993

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