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How do you stop a river? The answer is that you can't, really. When I was a little boy, I loved to build dams in the road on a rainy day. The water ran down the gentle slope of our drive like a small river. So I would pile up rocks and mud and build a dam. But I never won against the little river. Eventually, the reservoir behind the dam would fill up and flow over or flow around. I would work frantically to build up the dam on one end only to lose on the other end, or in the middle. The water always finds a way to keep on moving.

The gospel is like that. Satan tries his hardest to keep the gospel from spreading. Sometimes he threatens the church with persecution, but the gospel finds a way to be preached. Sometimes he causes conflict within the church itself, but even that cannot stop the gospel. Somehow, somewhere, the gospel must be preached. This is what Paul experienced when he was in prison in Rome.

THE GOSPEL CAN'T BE STOPPED!

Before we look at our text, let's spend a few minutes looking at the amazing story of the Apostle Paul. If anyone was a product of grace, it was Paul. His parents were Hebrews, but his father managed to become a Roman citizen, and so was Paul. That gave Paul special rights, and one of those rights was to appeal to Caesar as the supreme court. Acts 26:32 That's why he was in prison in Rome and not still rotting away in a prison in Caesarea.

He described himself this way later in this letter: **"circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless."** Philippians 3.5 He was trained in the thinking of the Pharisees and believed you could keep the law and get to heaven. So what did that mean? It meant that he hated Jesus. Jesus preached salvation by grace and by faith. He dared to say that the tax collectors and prostitutes would be getting to heaven before the Pharisees did. Why? Because they believed. Because the Pharisees were hypocrites.

It's been my experience that when you try to convince someone who believes in good works to get to heaven, they will stubbornly hold on to that belief. I talked to a man once who believed that the good works he did to earn his Eagle Scout badge would get him to heaven. "Pastor," he said quite angrily, "I can't let you take all my merits away from me." If you believe in your good works to save you, you can't let go of them. Your good works are your rubber raft in the middle of an ocean of doubt

and despair. And unless you can be convinced that your rubber raft is leaking and that grace can actually save you, you won't let go. Remember that your sinful nature is a Pharisee. Our natural inclination is to think our good works mean something, when before God they really mean nothing at all. You can't hold on to your good works and hold onto Jesus at the same time.

So Paul hated Jesus and everyone who preached Jesus. In Acts 7, he was there when a mob of angry Pharisees stoned Stephen to death. It says that Saul was there ... that was his name before he became a Christian ... holding the coats of the men who stone Stephen and giving approval to their murder. Acts 8.1 You get the feeling that he was probably involved in the planning.

So Saul, or Paul, kept persecuting the church. He was sent to Damascus to find some disciples who were preaching the gospel so he could kidnap them and bring them back to Jerusalem. Acts 9 And that's where he met Jesus. A light from heaven flashed all around him, blinding him. "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Jesus said. Then Jesus told him to go into the city and meet a man named Ananias, who would heal his blindness and baptize him. He also gave him a message from Jesus, that Jesus has chosen him to be his missionary to the Gentiles. I find that interesting. Jesus didn't really preach the gospel to Saul. He just scared the daylights out of him. He gave it to an ordinary Christian man to tell Paul about Jesus and to baptize him. From that moment on, Paul would become the greatest missionary ever lived and preach salvation by grace to as many people as he could.

You've often heard it said that the best form of advertising is the word of mouth of a satisfied customer tell his friends. Paul experienced the joy of salvation, not just on the day of his conversion, but every day of his life. Let me read you what he wrote in Romans 7:14-24. **"We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God--through Jesus Christ our Lord!"** Do you see what grace meant to Paul every day of his life? Every day he struggled with sin. Every day he fell short of the glory of God. And every day, every single day, God's mercies were new to him every morning. Lamentations 3.22 Grace wasn't something Paul experienced once in his life. It was not a "one and done" deal. God's grace renewed Paul every morning. Who better to preach the gospel than someone who experienced it firsthand every day in his life?

And who better to share the gospel with this community than you? You experience the grace of God every day. You know exactly how Paul felt when he penned those passionate words. You struggle against sin every day. Don't tell me you don't have pet sins that you struggle with. If you don't, then please take your pulse and make sure that you are still alive. But I am sure you know exactly how Paul felt. You would love to have an active, vibrant prayer life. But do you, really? Or do you just pray for your needs every day and rarely mention anything else? Do you spend any time in praising God at all? The Psalms are mostly prayers and they devote a great deal to praising. Do you do that? Or do you get

down to business and just ask. What a wretched prayer life I have! I know I want to do good prayers, but evil is right there with me. And I could say the same about every commandment of God. What a wretched man I am! So I go to bed at night, as you do, and confess my sins and then tell myself with some passage or another that God has forgiven me for Jesus' sake. In other words, I preach the gospel to myself. Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ! Thanks be to God that my sin does not keep the Gospel from working in me!

Friends, who better to share the gospel with your family, or with your neighbors, or with your co-workers or fellow students than yourself? **And God gives you those opportunities in the circumstances of your life.**

So Paul was in prison. When he wrote the book of Romans, he said he hoped to visit the Christians in Rome. Romans 15: 23-25 Then he was arrested in Jerusalem and spent two years in prison because a corrupt governor wanted a bribe from Paul. Acts 26.26-27 He appealed to Caesar and was ship-wrecked on the way to Rome. Acts 28 Then he spend the next two years under house arrest, which meant that he had four soldiers from the Imperial Guard watching him night and day, taking 6-8 hour shifts. I can't imagine how frustrating this must have been for a missionary who made three mission journeys around Asia Minor and Greece and planted who knows how many Christian congregations. And I am sure that the devil thought that he could do great damage to the gospel by putting Paul in jail.

But the gospel cannot be stopped! Listen to what Paul says. **Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.** The devil thought that he has dammed up the river, but the river broke loose and flowed even faster than ever. He says that the whole palace guard knew that he was in chains for Christ. There were four changes of the guard with four soldiers sitting in Paul's room every day. God brought sixteen people, different people, for him to share the gospel with. Pastors, wouldn't you love to have sixteen prospects locked up in your office for six hours every day? *The gospel cannot be stopped!*

And most of the Christians in Rome were made even bolder to share the gospel than they were before. I think the devil must be very logical person who hasn't been able to learn from the lessons of history. Over the ages, persecutions in the church have not worked. If anything, forcing Christians to not spread the gospel only made them more determined to do so. One of the earlier church fathers, Tertullian, who lived about 200 A.D., said, **“The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.”** How do you explain this? I don't think you can, logically. Spiritually, there is an explanation, and that is that the gospel is more powerful even than any of the difficulties that we face life.

When you experience the death of a loved one, you have the opportunity to share the gospel with many people. They come to share your tears and you have a chance to share your joy in the resurrection. They come to share your loss, and you tell them how thankful you are that God gave you a life together. They come – and they don't know what to say. But you do. God has given you all kinds of things to say. You talk about what it will be like in heaven someday, because you know you will be there with Jesus.

Sometime in your life you will probably be in prison. Not like Paul's, but confined to a hospital bed or in a nursing home. Some years ago, I visited the pastor who trained me in the hospital, Gerhard

Horn, who served as a pastor in Red Wing, MN. He had a stroke and it was a little difficult for him to talk. I shared a devotion with him and I was about to leave when he asked me to read another psalm for him. He explained the psalm to me. Then he asked for another Scripture and another, and I was his student all over again. Do you see that *the circumstances of life cannot stop the gospel from being preached?*

Nor can trouble INSIDE the church stop the gospel. Paul wrote this. **“It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached.”** Can we understand this? I think I can. Rome was established as a church before Paul came to Rome. There were leaders in the church who had the respect of the people, and then suddenly the great missionary is in town and everyone wants to listen to him, even if he is in prison. So some wanted to stir up trouble for Paul.

It is sad to see that in a Christian church. Luther once said that whenever God builds a church, the devil builds a chapel next door. What he meant by that is that the devil wants to make as much trouble in the church as he possibly can so that it loses its focus on preaching the gospel. We should not expect the church to be a perfect place, because it is filled with imperfect people just like me and just like you. Paul doesn't get into a turf battle. What does he say? “All that matters is that Christ is preached.”

Can you remember that statement? “All that matters is that Christ is preached.” We can rise above our petty differences. We can rise above our personality conflicts. We can rise above whether we like liturgy or don't like liturgy, whether we have children's sermons or don't have children's sermons, whether we do this or do that. All that matters is that Christ is preached!

Some are saying that we have reached the end of the Christian era. More people than ever before fill out their government forms and right “none” in the blank for religion. It seems as if Christians are losing. Don't believe it. They may be losing ground in this country, but it is gaining ground in others. The message of the gospel is just as relevant in this age as ever. So go out and preach the gospel. And if you don't, someone else will. Because you cannot damn up the river of the gospel. Amen.