

How God sends His gospel in surprising ways
May 2, 2010 - Romans 9:30-10:21

One summer night, a few years ago I was looking forward to a quiet evening at home. It had been a busy week and I was tired. Just as I settled into relaxation mode, the phone rings. It's my wife. She's at the church. "The car won't start. Can you come down here to see what's wrong?"

"What do you mean the car won't start? Is the battery dead?"

"I don't know but would you come to the church. I need you to come now."

I certainly didn't feel like going. But it seemed like I had no option. So I climbed into our other car and drove to the church. There the problem car sat in the parking lot. My wife came out of the church building and we met at the car. I opened the door and sat in the driver's seat. Her keys were in the ignition. The lights on the dash lit up. But when I turned the key nothing happened. Strange. Then I looked down at the gear shifter on the floor of the car. It pointed to the D. The car was in Drive.

Thankfully the car sat in a level parking lot. So I put the gear back into Park, turned the key and it started fine. I gave Lori a strange look. She would not leave the car in drive unless she was severely distracted. "It works now," I said intent on heading back home for the evening.

"Well, can you come in and pick up some stuff to take home?" she said.

"Alright," I sighed hoping to get in and out as quick as possible. We went in and she had some wimpy little grocery bag of stuff - like she couldn't carry that home herself. She also had a weird look on her face. "What's going on" I wondered. Then I saw one of my good friends come bounding out of my office and start running towards me. More people poured out of my office. "The whole world's gone crazy" I thought.

Finally, they all yelled "SURPRISE." It was my birthday and my wife had arranged a surprise party. What a shock but then a delight. We laughed about the scheming and my puzzlement. We enjoyed some cake and good laughs. Later, as I thought about it, I was surprised at the moment. But when I thought about my wife and the way she remembers birthdays and likes to make them special, it was not so unexpected.

Did you ever think God might be like that? Certainly God is faithful, trustworthy and doesn't change. He is rock solid and completely dependable. But that dependability does not rule out the possibility of surprise. God has delivered His surprises throughout history and in many lives here.

In fact, I'm arguing today that **God sends His Gospel in surprising expected ways**. Now Tom, what are you talking about? You've just stated a contradiction! A surprise by definition is unexpected. So how can God send His Gospel in surprising *expected* ways? Well we're going to see that the way God sent His gospel was surprising at first. But after thinking about God, His character and His Word, His surprises make sense.

So today, we have this opportunity to think about the surprising ways God has sent His Gospel to us. We've talked about the Gospel since last Fall. Why the focus on the Gospel? Without it, we're not a church. We have no power for ministry and no salvation in our lives. God saves us through the Gospel. We minister in the strength the Gospel brings into our lives. We try to keep the Gospel forefront and center in all we do. This protects us from trying to minister from human energy or losing focus on the centrality of the Gospel.

We started in chapter 1, verse 1 of the book of Romans. We saw Paul, the author declare, "I am not ashamed of this thing called the Gospel, it is the power of God unto salvation for anyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

In Romans 1-8, Paul declares He's not ashamed of the Gospel, explains why we need the Gospel and fleshes out the Gospel. We picked up the Romans study last week in Romans 9. We learned why God shows patience to the Hitler's of the world. One reason was to show the justice of His wrath and display His power. The other reasons was to show the riches of His glory to Christians. So God's patient endurance of Hitler 70 years ago allowed many people in this room, including me, to come to Christ and be heaven bound. We've also struggled with God's election and the potter clay images in Romans 9. All of this discussion came about because Paul was concerned about his countrymen. How could the Jewish nation, the "chosen people of God" in the Old Testament, collectively reject the Messiah of the New Testament? Why did the vast majority of Jews reject Jesus as the Christ? Part of Paul's answer in Romans 9 is God's election. Paul showed God's electing

work throughout the history of Israel. But now as the letter continues, we will see Paul explain Israel's own responsibility in the rejection of God's Gospel. Throughout that discussion comes the surprising yet expected ways God sent His Gospel in history and continues to send it today.

I hope as we journey through this passage today, you will be struck with the ways God has reached out to you. If you don't know God, He's going to be reaching out to you with His Gospel in the next few minutes. Will your heart be open to receive it?

Then I want to offer some ways we might respond to the great gift God has given us including gaining courage to go ahead with baptism and sharing the Gospel with those around us.

Romans 9:30-10:21

30 What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; **31** but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. **32** Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, **33** as it is written,

"Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."

10:1 Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. **2** For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. **3** For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. **4** For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

5 For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. **6** But the righteousness based on faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) **7** or "'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). **8** But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); **9** because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. **10** For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. **11** For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." **12** For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. **13** For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

14 How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? **15** And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" **16** But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" **17** So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

18 But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have, for

“Their voice has gone out to all the earth,
and their words to the ends of the world.”

19 But I ask, did Israel not understand? First Moses says,

“I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation;
with a foolish nation I will make you angry.”

20 Then Isaiah is so bold as to say,

“I have been found by those who did not seek me;
I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.”

21 But of Israel he says, “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.”

How does God send His Gospel in surprising expected ways?

Surprise 1 - He sent it through a stumbling stone. (9:30-33)

He sent it through a stone of stumbling, a rock of offense.

Starting in verse 30, Paul explains reality. Gentiles or non-Jewish Christians, in his day, attained righteousness by faith. Righteousness here means “right standing with God that is the product of God’s justifying work in Christ.” Remember “Justification” from Romans 3:23-24? “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God but all who believed are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness or justification with God, ended up receiving it because they heard the Gospel and trusted in Christ.

Jews however, pursued righteousness or right standing with God through the law. Why did they not get it? Verse 32. “Because they did not pursue it by faith but as if it were based on works.” In fact, they were so consumed with achieving right standing with God through works that they stumbled over the climax of salvation history. They were so focused on trying to earn right standing with God at the end of the path that they missed the provision of God in the middle of the path. This is the stumbling stone, Jesus Christ at the end of verse 32 and 33.

One commentator puts it this way. *It was a hard lesson for Israel to learn that in spite of all the privileges which were theirs, they could only obtain the divine gift of righteousness in the same way as those utter outsider Gentiles, who had been for ages past shut out from the knowledge of God and His ways.* (FF Bruce).
 God surprisingly brought the Gospel in the form of a stumbling stone.

But what is this stumbling stone image? God described Himself as the stumbling stone back in Isaiah. Paul puts together Isaiah 28:16 and 8:14 to come up with verse 33. In Isaiah 8, the prophet foretells how the Assyrian invasion will sweep over the land of Israel like the waters of a great flood. But there will be one place of refuge from the overwhelming water: God himself will prove a “sanctuary” to all who put their trust in him, a rock on which they will stand secure. But those who put their confidence in other powers or resources will be swept by the flood against this rock and come to grief upon it. To them, far from being a place of refuge, it will prove a dangerous obstacle – “a stone of offence and stumbling.” Those who turn to the rock for refuge would be saved.

This describes Jesus’ effect on the Jews of Paul’s day and on people today. The Gospel message comes through the stone Jesus that either trips you or supports you. He’s either the rock on whom people build their lives or the rock who they stumble over. Don’t we see this today? I’ve hear people say “I believe in God. He’s fine. But Jesus. He’s so exclusive – all this ‘No one comes to the Father except through me,’ silliness. There are many ways to God.” Have you ever heard that?

Or you can hear people stumble over Jesus in a different way. It goes something like this. “Religion is a crutch for weak people.” Or “if you need Jesus to get you through the day, that’s fine for you. But I’m doing just fine my own way.” What does that reveal? I think it shows that coming to Jesus and actually trusting Him or calling out to Him as a Savior is too humbling. If we can come to Jesus and have him hang with us in our lives as they are, He’s cool. But Lord over our lives? That’s where we can struggle or stumble. But that’s God’s way. You can’t just walk around the stone in the path. You either build your life on it or stumble over it. How else did God surprisingly send His Gospel?

Surprise 2 – He sent it through a finish line. (10:1-4).

He sent it through Christ who was the end or finish line of the law. Why is that a surprise? Because God's law is good! So why would it end in some way? God gave His law to His people at Mount Sinai. People really passionate for God believed that by keeping that law, they were paying God the highest honor. And they thought they could earn right standing before him. Lots of people have adopted this philosophy today like a former neighbor of mine once said, "as long as we do good things, we're okay with God, that's all that matters." But here Paul talks about Christ being the end of the law. So does that mean we can just ignore the 10 commandments and do whatever we want?

Well, let's see how Paul leads up to Christ is the end of the law. In 10:1, he again emphasizes how he deeply longs for his fellow Jews to be saved. He acknowledges their zealous passion for God. But their zeal is not based on the right knowledge. They have the wrong understanding. Paul could relate. He used to be one of these people. He thought hunting down Christians, arresting them and approving of their execution honored God until Jesus set Paul straight on the Damascus road.

People can be extremely passionate about God or their understanding of God. But if it's an understanding without knowledge, without God's truth, they head down the wrong paths. Verse 3 explains where it ends up. "For being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness." This is ultimately where every works-based faith ends up. You seek to establish your own right standing before God. What are you trying to do in Buddhism – working or thinking hard to attain that higher consciousness. What are you trying to do in Hinduism – do good so you will be reincarnated at a higher level and ultimately escape from the revolution of this life. What are you trying to do in works based churches – earn your way into God's good books; become one of the 144,000. What are you trying to do in Islam – keep the 5 pillars so Allah will accept you. It's trying to establish a right standing before God on one's own law keeping record, whatever law you decide to keep.

But that's so misdirected especially since Christ is the end of the law. Now what does this mean? The word end can mean "goal." That would then mean Christ is the goal of the law. He is the Stanley Cup of the

law. He is all the law pointed towards. I think this is certainly part of Paul's purpose. The sacrificial system finds its fulfillment in Christ. We saw in the I AM series that the festivals find their fulfillment in Christ. So He's the culmination or the final goal of the law.

But "end" can also have a time reference. The movie ended. It's over. I think that sense is also found here. The law's reign or rule is over in the sense of the way you primarily related to God. Now it's a life ruled by grace. This doesn't mean the Christ ended all law. We are still bound by God's moral law first stated in the 10 commandments and restated throughout the New Testament. But we interact with that law through Christ. We gain strength and power to obey that law from the Holy Spirit. We don't live under perpetual condemnation of the law because "there is therefore no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus." But we continue to grow in obedience of God's moral law as the Holy Spirit does His work.

So God again surprises us in sending His Gospel through Christ, the finish line of the law. But it was to be expected because the law and the Old Testament always pointed forward to something. Salvation and redemption weren't complete. They looked for the One who would bring that salvation. Christ brought it. **Surprise 3 – God sends His Gospel through belief not deeds.** God sent His Gospel into the hearts and mouths of all who simply call on the Lord. (10:5-13) Now at first that doesn't seem very surprising to us. Many here have heard that you receive the Gospel by calling out to the Lord or trusting in Him. But to a people that believed you could attain or achieve right standing with God through works, this was completely surprising. "All you had to do was call on the Lord's name and believe in your heart? That meant even outsiders like Gentiles could be saved." Many Jews did not understand this. But God chose to send His gospel through people's faith into their hearts and mouths.

Paul starts in verse 5 with perhaps the common Jewish belief. "The person who does the commandments shall live by them." Keep God's commandments perfectly and you shall be justified or in right standing before him. There's only one problem. None of us can do that. No one can perfectly keep God's law. "Who can say, I have made my heart pure, I am clean from my sin?" Proverbs 20:9. So, what can we do? Do we have the power to go up to heaven and bring Christ and salvation down to us? We can't do that. Do we

have the power to go down into the earth and raise Christ from the dead? We can't do that? What can we do? Only believe in the one who already came down from heaven, lived on earth, died on the cross, laid in the ground, rose to a new resurrection life and ascended back to heaven.

God's Gospel comes through faith or belief. Verse 9 "If you confess with your mouth Jesus is Lord." What has to happen in us before we make that confession? You must believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead. Now we must be careful here in our understanding of believing with your heart.

In our culture, what can believe in your heart mean? "I feel something to be true so I put my faith in it. It might not be true to you, but it feels true to me." Believing in your heart today can mean turning off your brain and going with what seems right. But according to the Hebrew mind, the center of thought was the heart! So "believing in your heart" meant to be convinced in your mind about the truth of something. That resulted in a guts response – the emotion of approval – the confession with your mouth – Jesus is Lord.

So when we believe, verse 10, we are justified or put into right standing with God. When we believe in Him, verses 11, we won't be put to shame. We will never wake up one day to discover Jesus was a sham. We will never find out He lied to us.

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, verse 12. The same Lord is Lord of all. The last time Paul used "there is no distinction was in Romans 3:22-23. For there is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Now there is no distinction for the same Lord is Lord of all. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

This is partially why Jesus' ministry shocked so many "religious" people. He talked to tax collectors, women of questionable character, Roman soldiers and other outsiders. He talked about them in the kingdom of God and the religious people as outsiders. "The first will be last and the last will be first." They thought it was by works when it was by faith.

Friends, please do not miss this. Engaging in religious activity does not make you right with God. Doing good deeds does not obligate God to save you. The first and only way to come is through faith in the Christ who came into history.

So God sends His Gospel in surprising expected ways like through a stumbling stone; through Christ who ended the law; through faith into people's hearts and lips.

Surprise 4 – He sent it through human preachers who proclaimed the word to us. (10:14-15) Now this is a surprise. God could have communicated to us directly. He could have sent angels to each one of us and told us “This is the deal. You need to put your faith in Christ to gain right standing with me.” But instead He chose to do it through people. Paul lays out how vital a preacher or bringer of the Gospel message is for a person to believe. I know this sounds self serving like I'm trying to justify my position. But you don't get off the hook. You are called to be preachers to the people in your lives. So Christians, imagine you're the preacher Paul talks about here.

Verse 14 – How are they to call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless someone is sent? You can't believe in someone you've never heard of. You won't believe if someone doesn't tell you about them. Christians here today, I suspect you can think of people God has sent into your life to proclaim Christ to you. Would you think of those people now? That was God reaching out to you with His Gospel.

If you're not a Christian and have never heard someone talk about Christ and your need for Him before, you can't say that anymore. I get the honor today. I'm one of the preachers God has sent to you. God could have delivered His Gospel to us in a much more efficient way like email or soul mail. But He chose to do it through us. Ultimately, this is not surprising because God has been sending messengers throughout history. He sends preachers into our lives so we can hear and believe. Verse 17 declares – Faith comes from hearing and hearing from the word of Christ. That's another reason why we're centered on the Word here. If we keep hearing the Word, people will keep hearing about Christ and have the opportunity to call out to Him. God sends His Gospel through human preachers.

Now I want to speak to those of you here today who are Christians and not baptized. I know that includes many of our young people. I have heard and can understand that there's one thing holding some of

you back from baptism – It’s sharing your testimony – speaking in front of a bunch of people. The fear of public speaking is real. I don’t want to minimize that.

So why do we require this? It’s not to be mean. I don’t lean back in the baptismal tank and love watching people squirm and suffer. We believe God commands it. Romans 10:9 says “Confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord.” 1 Timothy 6:12 – “Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.” I’m sure many of the Christians in the early church were scared of sharing their confession in the presence of many witnesses. What does sharing that confession publicly force you to do? Turn to Christ in faith for strength. Ask Christ, the one you believe in your mind has been raised from the dead for His strength. So it ultimately strengthens your faith.

Do I really believe this enough to step out of my comfort zone and declare myself for the Lord? But there’s another reason I think God calls for this. God sends His Gospel through preachers especially those who are not professionals. Some people will not listen to me because I’m a professional preacher. But when you “preach” they lower their defenses and God’s Gospel can get through. I’ve heard so many stories of people deeply moved to walk with Christ because of someone’s testimony and preaching before their baptism.

If you have been thinking about baptism please know many in this congregation will join with you in prayer and support leading up to that day. Most of all, the Lord Jesus Himself will walk with you. Ask any one of the folks recently baptized to share what God did through that time for them. We are thinking of a baptismal service June 20 or 27th if there are those interested. Think about what God might do through you.

Now let’s get to the final surprise of this passage.

Surprise 5 – God sent His Gospel to a foreign people. (10:18-21) He sent it to a people who did not know Him or seek Him. Paul has just stated that Gospel comes into a person’s life through a preacher. You can’t believe in someone you’ve never heard of. So maybe the Jews have not believed because they have not heard.

Paul answers that in verses 18-21.

Paul and his companions preached the Gospel all over Roman world. Whenever they arrived in a new city or town, the first place they went was the synagogue. They remained there as long as they were well

received. But most often, they were kicked out of the synagogues and the message rejected. So then they would go to the Gentiles in the marketplace or the debating centers. So the Gospel was first sent to the Jews. But when they rejected it, God sent it to those who “are not a nation, a foolish nation, those who did not seek God or ask for God.” He sent it to the Gentiles.

That means that everyone here who is not Jewish is part of this foreign nation. We benefited when God was willing to turn His eyes towards a people who had shown no interest in Him. We will find out next week about His heart for the Jewish nation.

But this surprising approach towards those who did not seek Him is not totally surprising. He showed mercy to the Canaanite prostitute Rahab, the Moabite woman Ruth, the Syrian general Naaman and the Ethiopian eunuch. When He reached out to you and me with His Gospel, He continued this pattern.

God sends His Gospel in surprising expected ways – through a stumbling stone, a finish line, belief, a preacher and a foreign people. What will we do with God’s surprising gift?

If you don’t know Christ, He reaches out to you today with His Gospel. It is the power of your salvation if you believe. This is not some close your eyes and hope its true kind of belief. It’s putting your faith in Christ as your savior and Lord. It’s believing in your mind the historical evidence for the resurrection. It’s affirming Christianity as true. Only through Jesus can you gain right standing with God and receive His glorious Gospel. Will this day finally be the day you will trust in Him? In a moment, I’ll lead you in a prayer that you might pray to receive Christ into your life.

Christians, we have received God’s Gospel through these surprising ways. Now what must we do with it? Verse 9 says “If you confess Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” One way to confess Jesus as Lord is through baptism. If you want to explore this or do this, fill out a response card and pass it to one of the pastors or contact us this week.

God calls all Christians to give the Gospel away to others. We have received His most precious gift. We must share it with others. In Romans 1:14 Paul wrote “I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish.” That means he owed something to everyone. I believed he saw Himself owing

everyone at least an introduction to the Gospel. Maybe you don't know how to do that. Over the next 3 Monday nights right here in this room, you will have opportunity to learn. Come to the Christian Life and Witness Classes to review the basics and learn more about sharing Christ. Then whether it be at Rock the River or over coffee in Starbucks, you will be prepared to be that preacher God might send.

God acts in surprising expected ways. He offers us the surprise gift of His Gospel. Let us receive it and proclaim it.