

Reached Through What

The Reach of God:

Romans 10:8-15

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Bob Peterson was a hard-drinking, foul-talking, self-satisfied (even self-righteous) truck driver. He felt good because he, at least, wasn't a hypocrite like the church people he despised. He had no time for Jesus, no time for the church and no time for church people. He had one problem. It wasn't a little problem. He loved his wife Clara, and Clara genuinely believed everything Jesus said and did. Clara was concerned about Bob's soul. She understood that as much as she loved him and as many good things as Bob did, he was a condemned man. Bob was rejecting the light that God had sent him, Jesus. Bob was rejecting God. Clara cried out to God for Bob's soul. She prayed for him constantly, and she got some Christian sisters to pray with her. They would come together and pray, and Bob knew they were praying for him. Clara knew better than to pressure Bob into going to church or attending special meetings. She knew that God would have to draw her husband. She worked with the church to put on special meetings that focused on beginning a relationship with Jesus. Of course, she would attend and invite her husband to come along. Naturally, he refused year after year. However, she continued praying with her church family about Bob, and they continued planning evangelistic events. During one such time, Bob refused Clara's invitation. He knew it would please Clara if he went, and he really wanted to please her. He also was feeling guilty about the way he was living, but he had an excuse of work to do, thankfully! However, a wasp interfered and drove him right out of his house. With his excuse gone, he hopped into his car and went to the church. Everything the preacher said hit the bull's-eye of his heart. Bob's crusty heart became soft with forgiveness and

divine love. In short order his desire for alcohol dried up; and he developed the habit of encouragement and praise rather than vulgarity and profanity. With his hard heart Bob had sewed a lot of pain. Soon he was sewing a lot of healing. Eventually he became lay leader of the congregation, and he helped many other truck drivers begin a relationship with Jesus. Bob often mused how God could use a wasp to deliver him from his destructive and condemned life. Bob understood that the wasp was an agent in fulfilling Clara and her friends' prayers and assisting their ministry.

I can't tell you how many Bob Petersons are out there. Although my friend Bob died a few years ago, thousands of husbands have stories like his. There are also thousands of wives like Clara who honor their husbands' right to make decisions but team with others to pray for them; and then they minister together to help people come into a relationship with Jesus.

Last week, we began a three-week focus on *The Reach of God*. We pondered God's activity among the human race. In doing so, we considered the desperate action of a drawbridge operator who traded the life of his son for the lives of passengers on a train. As we thought of that broken-hearted father, we asked, "What would make God trade the life of his Son for our lives?" The answer: love and desperation! Love produces sharing; but it takes desperation for sacrifice. God is desperate over our condition. We suffer not just physical death, but condemnation. Evil grips human hearts in deception and denial so that we reject God and his light, Jesus. Alienated from the light, we don't want to know the victims or results of our actions. We don't want to see the people who stumble and suffer because of us. We want soft light that hides our blemishes, that airbrushes our actions and spares us guilt. The Apostle Paul, lamenting about his own Jewish people, said:

My heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not

based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. (Romans 10:1-3, NIV)

We, like Paul's blood brothers and sisters, justify ourselves and die condemned because we reject the light. The gospel is not about our protection, provision, affirmation or comfort. It is about our salvation. Jesus' life and death makes no sense outside of desperation. That's the gospel. When we the church focus on protection, or provision, or affirmation or comfort rather than salvation, we ignore the gospel. We ignore the gospel and slip into a comfortable darkness that leaves us complacent (though we might be zealously religious), and we accommodate sin so that the world around us accelerates toward destruction. We are the leaven that changes the shape of the world. We are the light that brings understanding. We are the salt that attracts the presence and blessing of God. However, if the salt loses its savor, if the light is darkness, if the leaven is inert, then what happens? Our inattention and unbelief in salvation imperil our communities, endanger our loved ones and even put our own souls in jeopardy.

There is a righteousness that God produces in people as they draw their life from Jesus. Paul wrote that this righteousness is within easy reach. Quoting Moses' words, he wrote:

The message is close at hand; it is on your lips and in your heart. (Romans 10:8, NLT)

Paul was saying that there is no big secret about salvation. You've been hearing about it, talking about it and even sensing it. Since the beginning, it has been about submitting your life to God in faith; and now it is time to understand and act on it. God has come in Jesus and exalted him as Lord. Do you bend your knee before him? Do you believe with your heart that God raised him from the dead? Have you called upon Jesus to save you? Paul wrote:

For 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. For it is by believing in

your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by confessing with your mouth that you are saved. (Romans 10:9-10, NLT)

In any relationship, trust and communication are vital. If you are lost in a national park, calling on the park ranger is useless if you don't believe what he says. Similarly, believing is useless if you don't call for help. Paul wrote: ***"Anyone who believes in him will not be disappointed"*** (Romans 10:11, NLT) and ***"Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved"*** (Romans 10:13, NLT).

That is what changed Bob Peterson. My experience was so different. I was raised by my father, a pastor, and my mother, a children's missionary. My bedroom was next to my parents. Occasionally, I heard them argue; but more often I heard them pray. If I woke up early, I could hear them pray for me. God responded to their prayers and to their dealings with me. God's Spirit came on me when I was little. As early as I can remember, I didn't just believe in Jesus. I loved Jesus. My parents would tease: "You're Mama's boy." "No, you're Daddy's boy." "No, you're Mama's boy." I would look at the two with disgust and say: "I'm not your boy; I'm Jesus' boy." At four years of age, my father denied me communion. I wept and said: "I love Jesus too." That response was not any humanly constructed string of logic or reason. That was God's Spirit, and my father recognized that. He took me home and gave me communion; and from that time on, I was welcome at the Lord's Table. I wanted to please God, and so I worked hard to be good. However, with any achievements came pride and then failure. Repeatedly, my goodness was tainted; and I would suffer intense feelings of condemnation. I thank God because that misery drove me to confess and seek help. God used so many people to restore me. I saw so many changed lives that encouraged me; and then Sunday School teachers, youth workers, counselors, camp evangelists, peers, and older men and women of the church, all made an impact. Sometimes, I was too proud or scared to receive, but my hard heart would soften as I

repented and received forgiveness. It hardened whenever I tried to achieve what only comes through forgiveness. God's Spirit sewed passion in me so I kept repenting and experiencing renewal. The authentic Christian life of my parents, as imperfect as they were, and the many who joined them in witnessing brought me to believe and call on Jesus. Consequently, God's Spirit has broken the power that condemnation held over me, and the Holy Spirit continues to rescue me from deception, denial and the sins they protect.

What is your story? What made you realize your need for Jesus? Who or what made the gospel seem credible and worthy of your trust? Who helped you call on Jesus? When did God's love, including love for God, overtake you? Paul wrote:

How can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them? And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent? (Romans 10:14-15, NLT)

To whom has God sent you? Do you have neighbors, work associates or relatives that God has put on your heart? Have you made a list? Like Clara do you have a Bob for whom you're praying and partners sharing in that prayer? Are others sharing the burden of prayer for that wayward son or daughter? Are you working with others to help people begin a relationship with Jesus? Are you growing more comfortable in sharing how Jesus has changed you?

I have watched God reach so many of his stubborn, alienated, wandering and condemned children. I have witnessed prayers, lifted for years, finally get answered. I've watched wayward sons, daughters and spouses inexplicably return to the Lord. God will reach people through your story, through your life, through your prayers, through your teamwork with other believers, and through your perseverance. Get focused! The world can not live without our witness. No one can.