

FAITH COMES BY HEARING- AND LISTENING!

Today's Text: Romans 10: 1 - 17

Extracts:

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. *For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes... For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame."* ... But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our report?" *So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God* [Rom. 10: 1-4, 11, 16, 17]

*Mark Randall Wolford was a preacher in West Virginia, USA, who believed that Christians should handle snakes to test their faith.¹ Members of his congregation claim to rely on Mark 16: 17-18 for Biblical authority where Jesus said, "And these signs will follow those who believe: in My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; **they will take up serpents**; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover." During a worship service on Sunday, May 6, 2012, a rattlesnake, named Sheba, which Wolford had often handled, was passed to him. He put the reptile down and sat next to it. The snake bit him on the thigh and Wolford, who had turned 44 only the day before, died later that day in the hospital.*

What went wrong? For Wolford and his congregation, they had followed the word of God which clearly stated that believers could take up serpents and they would not be hurt. Now, the preacher did that; the snake bit him and he died. Was it that he did not have enough faith or that he did not hear the word of God correctly on the matter?

In this week's Bible verses, Paul tells us that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. What does it actually mean to hear? Is it not possible that many people who claim to hear are actually not listening? What if you hear and you misinterpret or misunderstand or do not believe what you have heard? There is so much that we need to unravel before we place ourselves in danger as in Wolford's case. This week's study is very important for everyone who wants to do exactly what the word of God says.

¹ Story is based on: Gil Aegerter, "Snake-handling preacher dies from rattlesnake bite in West Virginia," Wed., May 30, 2012, <http://usnews.msnbc.msn.com/news/2012/05/30/11956841-snake-handling-preacher-dies-from-rattlesnake-bite-in-west-virginia?lite>

1. Background: What it means to hear

In my primary school days, we used to play one interesting game. The teacher would line up about seven pupils in a sitting position. He would whisper something to the ear of the first pupil who would be required to whisper the same message to the next pupil on his/her right. Each receiver was required to pass the message to the next pupil on the right. In the end, the last pupil would be required to announce publicly what s(he) had heard. In ninety percent of the cases, what came out was substantially different from what the teacher had told the first pupil! The message would have been distorted or changed. The lesson, we were taught to learn, was that *what you hear is generally influenced by what you have been told and what you want to hear!*

To hear has several meanings. For example, it can simply mean to be aware of a sound (as picked up by the ears). I doubt if that is what it means in this week's Bible verses, as we shall soon find out. For background, let us go back several thousands of years from Paul's era to the time of Moses. The children of Israel had left Egypt and spent forty years in the wilderness for a journey that was meant to take less than two months. Disobedience was their main problem and those of them who were twenty years old and above when they left Egypt did not make it to the Promised Land. As the survivors were about to enter the Promised Land, Moses reminded them [**Deut. 30: 11-14**]:

*This commandment which I command you today is not mysterious for you, nor is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend into heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But **the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it.***

This is the theme that Paul took up in this week's Bible verses, He is talking about Israel's need for the Gospel of Christ. His heart's desire and prayer to God for his people was that they might be saved. They had a zeal for God's righteousness but not according to knowledge. Otherwise, they should have known that "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" [**Rom. 10: 1-4**]. In other words, *they had heard the word of God but they had not listened*. They had not paid attention to it. They had not heeded it. So, Paul drew their (and our) attention to an important conclusion: "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" [**Rom. 10: 17**].

Two human organs are at play (as we can infer from the words of Moses that Paul referred to in Verses 6-8): the mouth that speaks the word and the heart that believes it. Therefore, *the ear that hears it is the medium but hardly the processor of the message*. So, what does it really mean then to hear? Paul provides the answer as follows:

a) *What have you heard?*

The word of God here is the word of faith, namely, “If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation” [vv. 9-10]. But what have you heard?

Israel rejected the gospel because they did not believe in Him of whom they had not heard [v. 14]. For example, when Jesus defended His divinity before the high priest during His trial, the man tore his garments, saying, “Look, now you have heard His blasphemy!” [Matt. 26: 63-65]. What he heard was not what Jesus spoke but what his religion had taught him to believe!

What some believers know about Jesus or the Scriptures is what their religion or denomination has told them. Even when you try to encourage them to go to the source by themselves, they are not willing to do so because they do not want their faith in their doctrine to be seriously jeopardised. It is even worse to try to preach Jesus to other religious adherents, especially Muslims and Hindus. That is a kind of deafness, bothering on turf-guarding. ***You cannot hear the word when you do not want to hear it at all.*** If you do not want to hear it, how can you listen?

b) *What did you understand?*

Paul asked a question, “Have they not heard?” And he answered it, “Yes indeed.” The gospel had gone out to the ends of the earth but his people were not keen to understand it “for they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God” [Rom. 10: 3,18].

People hear what they want to hear and run with what they perceive that they have heard. For example, as Jesus was agonising on the cross, He cried out saying, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachtani?” which means, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” But some of those who stood there, on hearing Him said, “This Man is calling Elijah!” [Matt. 27: 45-47]. So, be careful what you run with from the word of God. As in the West Virginia church where the preacher died from a snake bite, believers have hurt themselves in different parts of the world, trying to take the word of God literally. For example, a young Nigerian firebrand believer reportedly cut off his manhood to check his fornication problem in “obedience” to Christ’s teaching, “If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you, for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole member to be cast into hell” [Matt. 5: 30]!

Some people hear but simply refuse to understand because they perceive that it is too hard for them to keep. For example, in the synagogue at Capernaum, Jesus taught His disciples that His flesh is food and His blood is drink. He is the living bread from heaven and whoever fed on that bread

would live forever. Many of them complained, saying, “This is a hard saying; who can understand it?” Thereafter, many of His disciples “went back and walked with Him no more” [Jn 6: 55-66].

c) *Did you obey?*

Some people may pass the threshold of understanding and still not obey. Of the Jews, Paul wrote, quoting the prophet Isaiah, “All day long I have stretched out My hands to a disobedient and contrary people” [Rom. 10: 21]. ***If people have rejected the gospel, it does not matter what they have heard.*** For example, after Paul had made an eloquent presentation of the gospel of Christ to the people of Athens, we are told, “When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, ‘We will hear you again on the matter’” [Acts 17: 22-32].

The Psalmist says, “Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as in the rebellion, as in the day of trial in the wilderness... For forty years I was grieved with this generation, and said, ‘It is a people who go astray in their hearts, and they do not know My ways.’ So I swore in My wrath, ‘They shall not enter My rest’” [ps. 95: 7-11].

From the foregoing, it is clear that ***hearing has three key components: hearing the sound, listening to or paying attention to it and heeding what it says. Until you have obeyed, you have not heard.*** So, faith comes by hearing and hearing by obeying the word of God with full understanding for “the wise shall understand” [Dan. 12: 10].

2. But are you listening?

According to the Scripture, whoever believes on the Lord will not be put to shame “for there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him, for whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved” [Rom. 10: 11-13]. The word of God, as the gospel teaches, is quite clear: Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to EVERYONE who believes [v. 4]. But are you listening? Are you one of the believers still struggling with exactly what you believe in- Jesus or your church doctrine? To answer that question truthfully, examine the following possibilities:

a) *You could be stone deaf!*

Some people are too scared to give up tradition, culture or the familiar. They have held on to “faith-truths” which are actually fables that are unsupported by the Scriptures. For example, some new firebrand preachers, trying to outdo their older colleagues nitpick² verses from the Bible to prove that Jesus did not die on Good Friday but much earlier. Yet, the word of God is quite clear that Jesus died on “Preparation Day, that is,

² To find insignificant details of something unsatisfactory, often unjustifiably-*Encarta Dictionary: English (North America)*

the day before the Sabbath.” That is Friday since Sabbath is on Saturday. As there was no time to prepare His body for burial before the observance of Sabbath from sunset on Friday, “Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph observed where He was laid” [Mk 15: 42-47]. So, “when the Sabbath was past,” and “very early in the morning of the first day of the week,” (that is, Sunday), Mary Magdalene and company actually came to the tomb to complete their anointing work when they found the tomb empty [Mk 16: 1-5]. In another example, some congregations cite the love between David and Jonathan that surpassed the love of women [2 Sam. 1: 26] as justification for their gay members to keep their lifestyles but forget that *agape* love [1 Cor. 13: 1-13] is not the same thing as homosexuality [Lev. 20: 13; Rom. 1: 26-28]. You cannot pick and choose!

The word of God as revealed in Scripture is given by God’s inspiration and is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness “that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” [2 Tim. 3: 16-17]. What you cannot understand, such as the Trinity, take it by faith because scientists and other faiths are more ignorant than you are on faith questions. ***Therefore, quit being stone deaf and let the Holy Spirit guide your heart and mind to a fuller understanding of the word of God.***

b) *You could be distracted*

It is possible that you are keen to know and obey the word of God but you are ***too distracted by the cares of this world*** to do so in full. ***You have no time to read the Bible but you can watch football matches on television for hours***, even into overtime. You are glued on *Facebook* or *Twitter* but you do not know where to get Genesis in your Bible without using the Table of Contents! You are looking for God in particles³ as a young scientist instead of in the Bible where the creation of everything by God has already been adequately explained [Gen. 1:1-31; Ps. 19: 1; Ps. 24: 1; Jn 1: 1-5]! So, why are you getting distracted?

Jesus came to visit two sisters, Martha and Mary. Trying to impress their august Visitor, the older sister, Martha, went into the kitchen to cook and “was distracted with much serving.” The younger sister, Mary, sat at the feet of the Lord to hear His words. Martha complained to Jesus, saying, “Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me.” But Jesus replied, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But ***one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part; which will not be taken away from her***” [Lk 10: 38-42].

³ <http://news.yahoo.com/god-particle-discovered-european-researchers-claim-discovery-higgs-101720774--abc-news-tech.html>

c) *But you should be attentive*

God said to Joshua soon after he took over from Moses, “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may **observe to do according to all that is written in it**. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success” [Josh. 1: 8]. After teaching them many things during the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus concluded by saying, “Whoever **hears** these sayings of Mine, **and does them**, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock” [Matt. 7: 24]. Therefore, **you are attentive when you hear, listen and obey** because man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from God’s mouth [Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4]. For example, sexual relations among human couples, married or unmarried, use similar methods and postures. But what makes fornication and adultery unacceptable is the word of God which condemns both of them as sinful but approves that between a husband and wife. Without the word of God, there are no absolute ethical standards.

In sum, your faith is measured by what it does for you. You are to walk by it and not by sight [2 Cor. 5: 7]. The word of God is near you in your mouth and in your heart and, because your faith is in the Lord Jesus, you will never be put to shame [Rom. 10: 8, 11]. *All those things can happen in your life because you have faith anchored on total obedience to the will of God for your life.* That is Paul’s message for you this week.

3. Conclusion: Hear Jesus!

God at sundry times and in sundry places spoke to the whole world by the prophets. In these last days, He has spoken to us by His Son, Jesus, through whom also, He made the worlds [Heb. 1: 1-2]. No prophecy of Scripture is subject to private interpretation because prophets of old spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit [2 Pet. 1: 20-21]. People like Peter who were eye witnesses of the Transfiguration of Christ have confirmed that their faith in the Lord did not come out of cunningly devised fables [v. 16]. Therefore, **even though human seasons and moods may change or swing from generation to generation, the word of our God stands forever** [Is. 40: 8].

Jesus once told His listeners, “Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do the things which I say?” [Lk 6: 46]. Elsewhere, He added, “You are My friends if you do whatever I command you” [Jn 15: 14]. So, if faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God, have you heard what Jesus has told you? He has already died for your sins. He is with you always even to the end of the age [Matt. 28: 20]. He is right now knocking at the door of your heart. Have you heard? Will you open so that He can come in and sup with you and you with Him [Rev. 3: 20]? You have heard Him but have you listened?

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