

# God's Greater Plan for You - Transformed for Service

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God's Greater Story / Service; Transformation; Restoration; Vocation / Romans 11:33–12:8

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- › Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The poet, Elizabeth Barret Browning, once wrote:

*Earth's crammed with heaven  
and every common bush afire with God  
but only he who sees takes off his shoes.*

Earth is crammed with heaven. God comes down from heaven and touches the earth, filling it with his glory. But only those who see take off their shoes.

Our readings this morning invite us to be among those who see. They invite us to see the earth crammed with heaven, to see how God in Christ has come down from heaven and touched the earth to fill it with His glory.

Consider the Old Testament reading. Here we have a vision from Isaiah. Isaiah writes to a future people, suffering in exile away from Jerusalem, and he reveals for them a world crammed full of heaven. "Look," he cries. And there, he reveals the wonder of God. One family, Abraham and Sarah, touched by God's grace and the source of God's blessings for all nations of the world. One see the glory spread as God multiplies descendants for Abraham, extending his blessing from one family to all nations. Isaiah promises that the wasteland of Jerusalem, the city that is devastated, will experience rebirth and blossom like the Garden of Eden. Songs of sorrow will become shouts of joy. God's salvation will go forth and, though heaven and earth pass away, God's righteousness will remain. His salvation will endure forever.

In the Gospel reading, we find Caesarea Philippi crammed full of heaven. Jesus has drawn his disciples north, far above the Sea of Galilee, where the land breaks forth into hills and waterfalls and fresh flowing mountain springs. The place was ancient. It had been a site for worshipping Baal among the Canaanites, and then Pan among the Greeks, and then Caesar among the Romans. As cultures changes, so did the worship. Yet, here, Peter confesses heaven touching earth in the unchanging work of God, now seen in Jesus. This is not an ancient pagan religion. Peter does not worship a fertility god like Baal or a god of nature like Pan or a

god of the political state like Caesar. No, Peter worships God, the creator of all things, who promised to bring salvation to the ends of the earth, and has now come to live and walk among his people. Peter confesses Jesus, a Jew, a Nazarene, to be the Christ, the Son of the living God.

What Isaiah prophesies in the Old Testament reading, what Peter confesses in the Gospel is what the Apostle Paul celebrates as he writes to the Christians in Rome. Paul has seen earth crammed with heaven and in these verses, he shares with us a life transforming vision.

This morning, we will take some time, first to consider Paul's vision and then to see how it transforms our lives for service in God's World.

Consider Paul's Vision!

You know how sometimes when you look at the sun and then look away, your vision is touched by an afterimage of the light. You see the people around you, but they look different. They are bathed in the glow of the light. This is what happens to the apostle Paul in our text. He has seen a brilliant vision. The glorious work of God, extending to all nations. And then, when Paul turns and looks at the people of Rome, he sees them in a different way.

Listen to the wonder of Paul at the beginning of our text:

*33 Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*

Paul has seen a vision of the end of the story. The restoration of all peoples in the church. The New Israel of God. That vision is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy from our Old Testament reading this morning. Isaiah prophesied of a time of "joy and gladness" of "thanksgiving and son." Isaiah promises:

*And the ransomed of the LORD shall return  
and come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain gladness and joy,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

This is what happens for the apostle Paul. Paul sees the day of restoration, when God brings about a gathering of nations, all nations, Jew and Gentile, into the church, and Paul's sorrow turns into singing, his sighing into praise. It is as if Paul has seen the light of a beautiful sunset, a glorious ending to a long and difficult day, and his song changes from sorrow to joy, from sighing to gladness. He offers praise and thanksgiving and glory to God.

Then Paul turns his eyes to the church in Rome. Now, the Roman Christians would not have been glorious to the world around them. Not many of them were rich. Not many of them were powerful. They gathered together in small house churches, their lives a far cry from the glories

of Rome much less the glories of heaven. And yet, as Paul looks at these people, he sees earth crammed with heaven and he writes so that they join him in celebrating the wonder of God.

Paul writes:

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.*

Here, notice how Paul uses the language of sacrifice. The sacrificial worship of God's people, that glory of the temple in Jerusalem, is suddenly transformed. God's people become sacrifices, outside the temple, outside Jerusalem, hidden inside the small house churches gathering in the heart of the large empire of Rome. These people are God's people, transformed into sacrifices, living, holy, acceptable to God. Paul knew that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ put an end to temple sacrifices. His death was the perfect sacrifice. He was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. By his sacrifice, they were freed to become sacrifices. Living sacrifices of praise. As they poured out their lives in service in the world.

As Paul looks at the people in Rome, he sees an afterimage of God's glory. They are the body of Christ, at work in the world. Paul begins to see gifts of the Spirit poured out upon the people - prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, contribution, leadership, and mercy. Not only does God freely forgive all sins but he also freely bestows all gifts, so that people have a purpose and a place in God's greater story. God has a greater plan for each person in his story of salvation.

This is the vision that Paul sees. It stirs his heart with wonder. It opens his mouth with praise. Earth is crammed with heaven as God gathers his people and transforms them for spiritual service in the world.

"Earth's crammed with heaven," Elizabeth Barret Browning once said. "But only he who sees takes off his shoes." And that's the trouble with God's people. Often, they don't see this vision of God at work in their lives in the world.

For the Apostle Paul, there was some concern that the Roman Christians would take pride in their status and gifts for service. Paul warns them:

*3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think*

God's people, today, however, often have the opposite problem. Ask a fellow Christian how God works among his people and see what they say. Often, we will point to the service of others rather than confess God's work through our lives. Often, we will point to moments set apart of worship, rather than confess God's work in daily life.

For example, some will point to the pastor of the congregation. He is God's servant, the one the Holy Spirit has called through God's people to serve in their midst. They are right. But God's Work is not limited to him. Give it some more thought and you may name a few other

members. Older members. Faithful members. Those who have gone before us. And soon our mind drifts from the present to the past and then we begin to speak of how God worked among his people. Great figures of the faith come to mind. We talk about what God did through his servant Martin Luther. The rich music of Bach. The inspiring hymnody of Gerhardt. We see and celebrate God's gifts to the church, how God calls, gathers, enlightens, and equips members for service in a particular time and place. But turn from the past to the present and the vision changes. The glory fades until we only see a very small group of very few people that we speak of as serving God. Our vision is nowhere near the inclusive all-embracing celebration of Paul.

Listen, today, to the Apostle Paul. He invites you...today...to trust in God's promises and experience his greater plan for you.

God has brought about your salvation in Christ. He has offered the perfect sacrifice that takes away your sin, that forgives your blindness and opens your eyes to see and your lives to celebrate the working of God. God does more than work in the lives of others. He works in your life...for others...in this world. This is why Paul starts to name gifts - actions such as teaching, service, leadership, mercy. His list is certainly complete. It is only suggestive. But Paul names these things so that you can see how God is at work in your life. Paul invites you today to be transformed by the renewal of your mind. He encourages you to test and discern God's good and gracious will in your life.

You may devote your life to caring for cattle or tending the earth that it brings forth food to the table. This stewardship of creation is a gift from God. Not all people are called to such service but God in Christ has called you and equipped you for this work. You may teach the faith to your children. Not in formal classes with desks and lectures and quizzes, but informally, in the car as you shuttle your kids around and talk about the challenges to his faith, or it's when you are discussing all these anxious days of Covid-19 and you talk about all the blessings that God gives to His people even in times of trouble. Parenting is a gift from God. Not all people are called to such service but God, in Christ, has called you and equipped you for this work.

Martin Luther taught us to see the marvelous expanse of the mercies of God, working through us in our vocations, no matter what they are. To live in God's mercy is to enter the world and discover God at work in our humble lives. He transforms us for service.

There is a monument east of London at Three Mills Green. It pictures two hands, joined together, in self-sacrificial service.

Over a hundred years ago, Thomas Pickett was working in a well. He was overcome by carbonic acid (the "foul air") that gathered in the well. Godfrey Nicholson responded. He went and reached out his hand to help. He was followed by Frederick Eliot and then Robert Underhill. Each worker dying in the end. To remember these men and their self-sacrificial service, a workers' memorial was erected. Two hands, joined together, in self-sacrificial service.

If you were to go to London, it would be easy to miss this monument. After all, London is filled with so many glorious things to see. The crown jewels. Big Ben. Buckingham Palace. The changing of the guard. But there, in east London, at Three Mills Green, stands a much humbler sight. A memory of people, ordinary people, who offered their lives in acts of self-sacrificial love. Their daily vocation became a place for service, service to others and service to God. This place does not gather many crowds and it does not inspire tours, but it does recall the way God works in the world. Through the lives of his people in their daily vocations. This is how God's hand reaches into our world. He touches his people, transforming them for service, so that they offer their gifts as a sacrifice of praise.

What this monument does in East Long, Paul does with his words in this letter. He calls us to see the glory of God, hidden in the lives of his people, in self-sacrificial service on earth. Our world would have us conform to its ways. Seek glory and power by gaining things for ourselves. In the ways of our world, religion can become one more tool we use to make ourselves better. Claiming the power of God to gain glory on earth. God's ways are different, however. Humble. Hidden. Sacrificial. Selfless. In a world attracted to a glory, the apostle Paul asks you see God's greater plan for you. You have been joined to the body of Christ. Made part of his people by the forgiveness of your sins. And Paul now invites you, in view of God's mercies, to no longer be conformed to this world but to be transformed for service! To live by giving rather than gaining! By service rather than selfishness.

In this way, the Church is the after image of the glory of Christ. It reveals the ways of God in the world. We are the body of Christ, drawn into his public ministry. Our lives are monuments of his self-sacrificial love. Each life touched by the hand of God. Your life joined to the ministry of Christ. "A Living Sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God."

In Jesus Name. Amen.

- › Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Amen.