

All Roads Lead Here: Not Ashamed Of The Gospel Of Salvation
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 119:116-117; Mark 8:34-38; Romans 1:8-17

Friends, our final Scripture reading today comes from Paul's letter to the Romans 1:8-17. May God bless the reading of His Holy Word. "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you. I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong -- that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles. I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome. I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith.""

Does anyone still write letters? A few people do. The older we are, the more likely we are to write letters. Thank-you notes are still big – and if I owe you one, I apologize because I'm terribly forgetful about them. Sometimes we'll drop a postcard to a loved one when we're on vacation. Occasionally we'll get update letters from missionaries we support around the world. But does anyone still write long letters? 3, 4, 5 or more pages?

Much of what we know about history is from the letters of those who came before us. Kings and peasants, historians and generals, everyday letters, tell us what mattered to people. Their thoughts, hopes, dreams. People argued through letters long before Facebook. Read the letters of the Founding Fathers of America and you'll find a treasure trove. You'll learn they were complex individuals in complex times. Our modern culture gives information at our fingertips, but not the pleasure of sending and receiving real letters.

That brings us to Paul's letter to the Romans. In our high-tech world, letters like this one seem passé. Why do letters matter? Why should we study the letters of the early church? Today's passage from Romans tells us why we should care. It tells us why Paul took the time to write this letter specifically to the Roman church, and it introduces us to the core theme he'll speak about. As we learn from Paul, we will find rest in the promises of God to us.

Paul starts things off joyfully. "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world." Paul is overjoyed because there are believers in Rome. He doesn't complement them on the strength of their faith – he does that for believers in other cities when they come under persecution – but that there is faith at all in Rome, and enough that it is making waves.

Think of it. Rome is the cosmopolitan center of the ancient world. All roads literally did lead to Rome in this era. It was the cultural hub of civilization, where great art and music and philosophy mixed with the violence of the arena, pagan worship, and the decadence of the rich. 80% of Roman citizens were slaves – and most weren't forced into it. There were so many wealthy patrons there that people willingly sold themselves into years of servitude to get a chance in Rome, a chance at culture, a chance at a better life.

And Christianity spreads there. It's no longer a little religion from a little backwater nation. It's gaining traction with the cultured and the ignorant alike. The great city is interested in this Jesus of Nazareth. Now before all is said and done, perhaps twenty years after this letter, Christians become the scapegoats of the Roman Empire, blamed for fires Nero set to Rome and hunted down for decades. But even then, people still come to faith in Jesus despite the dangers.

And here's a take-home thought for you: *Christianity has stood the test of time and overcome vast cultural differences because it is true.* In some circles, Christianity is seen as harmful. It gets in the way of progress. It discriminates, telling us what is right and wrong with clarity and certainty our culture hates. We are told to be Christians is to be culturally irrelevant.

But culture has always looked at Christians as strange, weird, and dangerous. Romans thought the Christians were atheists because they didn't sacrifice to Caesar. Then they thought they were cannibals because they misunderstood the Lord's Supper. Roman culture didn't think it had anything to learn from Christ. They had Plato and Socrates and Ovid; they had their own gods. Christianity conflicted with their views on spirituality, sex, relationships, government, everything. Rome was the last place you would expect Christianity to thrive.

And yet Christianity flourished in Rome. Why? Because it is true. God sent His Son into the world not to condemn but to save, to rescue from sin every single person who would trust not in themselves but in Jesus. Our faith has stood firm for 2000 years not because it provides godly morality, though it does do that. Our faith has stood firm not because people in high places flocked to it (though a few did). Our faith has one thing going for it: truth. Living in the footsteps of Jesus brings a new and better way of life, one that brings us joy and hope. Over a billion people over time have realized its truth. Stand firm in your belief in Christ. It will never fail because Christ is truth.

Moving on, Paul writes, "God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you." How do the Romans know Paul cares about them? He prays for them. He's never met them. For reasons we don't know, God kept Paul from heading to Rome for many years. He eventually makes it around 62 AD, in shackles, testifying before Caesar himself about Jesus. But Paul prayed for them constantly and wanted to meet with them. It was the cry of his heart.

That brings me to both an encouragement and a challenge: *Do you know you are prayed for? And are you praying for others in our church and the universal church?* Because you are prayed for. I pray for you. Catha prays for you. We both pray for CrossWay...maybe not as fervently or as often as Paul prayed, but we pray for you.

When you are struggling and things get hard, when life is rough and you just want to give up, know that God is with you – and that other people are praying for you even though we might not know your specific situation. It's the same reason we pray for our missionaries and our Compassion children and other local churches on a weekly basis together. We want God to work in their lives, too. We pray for them. Live encouraged that someone is praying for you – and since God knows the details, our prayers for you are more than enough.

But in the same way, I encourage you to make prayer for others a regular part of your day. Pray for the people of the church, the ones you know well and the ones you don't, the ones you love like brothers and sisters and the ones that annoy you. Pray for me. We all need prayer. It is encouraging to know that we are heard by God when we pray, and it's even more encouraging to know that others are being heard on our behalf. And pray for those you may never meet or see. You will learn in eternity the good those prayers did here on Earth.

Now, why does Paul want to visit the Roman church? He writes, "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong -- that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles."

Let's be clear about this – Paul is not talking about giving them spiritual gifts like the gift of healing or the gift of speaking in tongues. Those aren't his to give, but God's. Instead, he wants to teach them more about the faith so that they would be refreshed and enlightened, so that they would cling to Christ with ever greater strength. He wants them to be strong so that when times of persecution come, they don't fall away but prove their love of Jesus.

Yet Paul doesn't do this just because he's called of the Lord or because he's a really nice guy. He wants to be encouraged by seeing their faith in person. A good friend of mine from seminary named John is currently in Cambodia on a mission trip. He's shared just a little bit via Facebook about their trip. These believers who seem so different and have so little are just like us – clinging to God. His posts encourage me! Paul wants to be encouraged by the Roman believers. It will do his heart good to learn from them, to see how faith in Jesus has changed their lives, to know what God is up to in the capital of the empire.

And just like we talked about with prayer, *we belong to the church to be encouraged by Christ and to encourage others in Him*. As the saying goes, "We are blessed to be a blessing." When we share how our prayer requests have been answered, that's encouraging! When someone new comes into our community of faith, that's encouraging! When our youth learn the faith and truly believe, when someone has an "aha!" moment at Bible study, when someone's heart is poured out before the Lord when we sing together, that's encouraging!

As your pastor, I'm here to equip you, to watch over you and to come alongside you. But it's not a one-way street. The Spirit works in each one of us, so we can bless one another. Sometimes we judge a church by how much we get out of the worship service. But worship isn't about us! We come together for the mutual benefit of us all. When we all give, when we all participate and share God's gifts to us, we all enjoy seeing the Spirit work in our midst.

Then Paul goes on: “I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome.” In the original language, Paul says he owes a debt both to “Greeks” and “barbarians,” which is a parallel to “the wise” and “the foolish.” Whether you’re cultured or not, whether you’re in the social elite or just walked out of redneck country, whether you’re super smart or not so bright, *Paul (and the church) is obligated to present the good news of Jesus to you.*

No one is owed the gospel. But as God’s servants, we have been given a job to do. If God has given me something for you, I’m indebted to you until I give it to you. What you do with it is your business, but if I never deliver it, then it’s on me. It is on the shoulders of the church to hand down the faith to all who accept it. Paul wants to make good on his debt. So should we. It’s our duty and privilege to let others know about the good news we have in Christ.

Now we get to the heart of the matter, the central concept Paul unpacks in the rest of the letter. “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

We cannot be ashamed of the gospel – our very salvation rides on whether we embrace the truth and live by it or are ashamed of it and let go of it. Paul is not ashamed of it. Yet the very mention of the concept by both Jesus and Paul means there’s something to it. It is easy to be ashamed of the gospel. Why? Paul tells us in another one of his letters.

In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul says that the message of the cross – Christ being crucified for our sins – is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness and folly to the Gentiles. In 1 Corinthians 3:19, he says, “For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight.” The good news is ridiculous to the lost. We know how unwilling the world is to listen to the message of Christ.

Yet Paul is not ashamed to tell everyone he meets about the gospel, and neither should we. Here’s why: “it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.” Christ crucified is the means, is the power, by which God delivers us from His own righteous, perfect, and holy wrath on sin. Everyone who believes on Jesus’ name and follows Him is out from under the curse of sin and God’s judgment on us for our sins.

The world wants us to be ashamed of Christ because the world doesn’t want to deal with the bad things they’ve done. I don’t want to deal with the bad things I’ve done! If we keep Christ to ourselves, they don’t have to think about it. But that’s why we’ve got to proclaim it! If none of this matters, if God will save everyone and won’t judge the world, if we’re wrong and beyond the reason and experience of millions there is no God, then there’s reason to be ashamed.

But eternities are at stake here! If this is true, then we cannot, we must not, be ashamed. We must be good ambassadors of the gospel, not worrying so much about elections and politicians, not worrying so much about the things we own and the cars we drive and the houses we live in, but doing everything possible in grace to tell people about Jesus! We can’t make people follow Jesus; only God can do that.

But how cruel to withhold the news of eternal life from others because they might not like it or we might get embarrassed. Wouldn't you share a slice of pizza or a burger from your favorite restaurant with someone who was literally starving, genuinely dying of hunger? Of course. So why don't we share the news that could keep a person from an eternity suffering outside the presence of God? Let's make sure we aren't embarrassed and just hiding it well. Let's be courageous and share the word – because the gospel is the power of God to save us from our sin. It's for everybody. God chose the Jews first, they are His special people, but now it's open to everybody, and has been for millennia. Let's not miss out or leave others out!

Here's the most important part – if you lost track of me before, come back for this, because it's the most important. Here's what the gospel tells about: “For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.””

The clearest way to put it is this: *the gospel tells us how God makes us right in His sight.* The good news is that through Jesus, God grants us perfect righteousness. He sees us as righteous, as right with Him. The righteousness God gives us is given to us by the faith that God Himself plants in our hearts. This righteousness comes from God; it is external. As Martin Luther put it, it is “alien righteousness.” We don't act in holy ways; we aren't just; we don't create rightness with God. God gives it to us, and we receive it through faith in Jesus which God Himself gives to us.

The Old Testament said that the righteous will live by faith. That means that the only way to be right with God is to trust in Him, to believe in Him and follow Him in faith that He is living and active and good. When we trust in Him, God calls us right with Him even despite our sins. Through faith, we are given the right to become God's people. That's the good news. The gap between us has been bridged; the path that was torn down by sin is now open. And we don't get on that path by being good or doing good deeds. We are declared right by God simply by believing in His Son Jesus. The good news is that God has done everything for us in order for us to be reconciled to Himself, and that reconciliation happens through the gift of faith that we exercise in Jesus.

The rest of the letter is going to detail how all that works. It's going to teach us why sin is such a problem, why the world is condemned, why we need a Savior (both Jews and Gentiles alike), and how God has put the whole thing together. We'll be getting all the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle. But the thing we need to know is this: if you have faith, you are right with God. If you have faith, rejoice because your name is written in God's book of life. If you trust in Jesus for salvation and truly desire Him, if you are not ashamed of Him, He will be proud to bring you into His Kingdom. And if some part of you is still on the fence, pray to Him. Ask for Him to make faith real inside you. Because this is the promise, this is the goal, this is the gospel: salvation for all who have faith.

May you leave today confident in faith, knowing that God has saved you, and share that good news, encouraging your friends, family, and fellow brothers and sisters in Christ with the truth that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior.