

The Power of the Gospel

Romans 1:8-17

⁸ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world.

⁹ For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, ¹⁰ asking that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. ¹¹ For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— ¹² or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. ¹³ I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles. ¹⁴ I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish ¹⁵ —hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome. ¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith."

Theme Statement

The power of God is active and effective among the community of believers. We join Paul in praying for the salvation of the world, believing that it is possible.

Exploring the Word

The proclamation of the gospel in this session's scripture is part of a greater context that includes centuries of God's faithfulness toward God's people. It reiterates and adds detail to the promise of God across generations. In the verses immediately preceding the focus passage, Paul traces Jesus' lineage to David, thus connecting him to the promise of a kingdom forever. Paul also says Jesus was appointed to this role through resurrection. This helps us understand the verses that follow.

Romans 1:8-10 Long-distance dedication

Following his usual custom, Paul lifts up the recipients of his greeting in a way that also announces his spiritual focus for the letter. He recognizes the reputation of the Roman church's faith and assures them that his prayers are for a deepening of his relationship with them. Not content with a virtual relationship through mail, he wants to meet them in person. That goal would be realized years later, after a very perilous journey.

Romans 1:11-15 Mutual encouragement

The practice of gathering for worship and teaching has served as a source of inspiration for Christians in faithful living. Paul's desire to meet with the believers in Rome is not just so *he* may be an example to them, but so he can also benefit from the example of *their* faithfulness. He emphasizes that every believer brings something to the table in the Christian faith. While Paul has specific gifts to encourage the church, the testimony and example of others also encourage *his* faith.

The phrase "I am a debtor to both Greeks and barbarians" is acknowledgment that the good news of God's love in Christ Jesus is for all people. The Romans considered themselves heirs to Greek culture. They even spoke Greek in Rome. "Greeks and barbarians" was a way to say "the whole world."

The message of the gospel is for the whole world. John wrote, "For God so loved the [whole] world . . ." (John 3:16). The work of God through Jesus' death and resurrection was for all creation. Later in Romans, Paul writes, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

The heritage of the Christian faith demonstrates that the gospel is for all people and impels believers to spread the gospel around the world, according to the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20.

Romans 1:16-17 The core of the gospel

Paul uses a literary device called a "litotes" to emphasize his commitment to the gospel. This device understates a positive concept or experience by negating its negative. "I am not ashamed" draws attention to how Paul feels about the good news of God's love for all people through Jesus Christ. The contrast shows his absolute commitment to it. Another example of a litotes in the New Testament is found in Acts 12:18, where we hear that there was "no small commotion" over Peter's absence from prison. Today we might hear a litotes in ordinary conversation when, in response to "How are you?" someone says, "Not bad" to mean they are actually doing well.

Following his understated commitment to the gospel, Paul declares that it is more than intellectual assent to a set of concepts, but it is a power that is lived out in the life of the

believer. That power moves the community toward salvation and deep relationship with God through Christ.

In verse 17, Paul writes, “For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith.” Some translations say “through faith out of faith.” Even faith is not our own, but comes from the power of God’s faithfulness toward us. God’s power is employed on our behalf.

The Word Today

In the midst of the COVID-19 precautions, the congregations of Dunlap, Iowa, canceled their long-practiced fall dinners, which had been times of fellowship across denominations and of fundraising for special missions. This was particularly difficult because the community had experienced limited contact with each other for months.

Already, graduation celebrations and VBS, July parades and congregational picnics had been canceled. Rally Days, backpack blessings, and the much-loved traditions of the beginning of school had been eliminated. The spring first-communion celebration had been postponed and still hadn’t happened. Like Paul and the Roman believers, the people of the faith communities longed to be together to talk, to share, to care for one another.

St. John Lutheran carefully considered the risks, studied the recommended protocols from denominational and federal groups, and figured out a way to safely keep the fall dinner tradition alive—but in a different way. One Sunday in October, while it was still warm, they set up tables beside the church building, hired an onsite caterer, and put together “to go” meals. Masked people from Dunlap and the nearby communities lined up in cars and pickups to drive through the parking lot and get carefully packed boxed dinners from gloved, masked, and sanitized

Lutherans. Catholics and Methodists and Assembly of God members joined the “spiritual but not religious” population for a brief encounter over two hours that afternoon. The eyes of drivers and passengers and servers all evidenced the mask-covered smiles of joy as everyone relished this brief moment of remembered community and celebrated lifelong sharing of faith. Phone conversations resumed with increased frequency in the coming days. The leaders of the other churches in town commented on how important this experience was and how it boosted the spirit of those in their churches. They also recognized the adherence to recommended practices at that stage of the pandemic.

Sharing our faith happens more in everyday settings than in big, organized events. The conversations over coffee and pie build relationships. Trust develops, and weaknesses can be shared. And that’s the time when faith experiences go back and forth between people. Our stories of God’s power in our lives, even in the small things, open eyes and hearts to the presence of that same power in the lives of our friends and loved ones. And their stories bless us. That’s the power of the gospel.

When physically gathering as church is limited or individuals are isolated by circumstances, it is vital that we find ways to connect with and to encourage each other. A simple conversation becomes a “cup of cold water” (Matthew 10:42) that refreshes and renews all involved.

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. What ways do you use to keep in touch with friends and loved ones?

2. Who inspires you to be your best?

Exploring the Word

1. What feelings might the Roman believers experience as they hear each of the three sections of today's scripture (vv. 8-10, 11-15, and 16-17)?
2. Paul recognizes the Roman believers' influence on his faith (v. 12). Name other places in the New Testament where an individual's faith affected a leader's understanding of God's work through Jesus.
3. Paul quotes Habakkuk 2:4 in verse 17. Habakkuk wrote about faith in a time of impending challenge. Paul wrote in a similar time. How might these words inform the faith of the Roman believers?

The Word Today

1. On a scale of zero (not at all) to ten (absolutely essential), how inspirational to you is being with other believers?
2. Describe a situation where another Christian's faith story helped you to better see God's action in your life.
3. Make a list of ways your group can, like Paul, join with people outside your congregation to offer prayers and mutual encouragement.

Closing Prayer

I will give thanks to [you, Lord,] with my whole heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds. I will be glad and exult in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High. Psalm 9:1-2.

Further Study

Ephesians 3:14-21

Daily Readings

M. 1 Corinthians 3:1-11
T. Galatians 2:1-10
W. Romans 1:1-7
T. Romans 1:18-23

F. Romans 1:24-32
S. 2 Peter 2:4-9
S. Romans 1:8-17

Memorization

Romans 1:16

I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.