

# ROMANS

Part 2: “The Church of Rome & the Power of the Gospel”

Romans 1:8–17

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Sunday, January 16, 2022 (Sanctity of Life Sunday & MLK Weekend)

## Scripture Reading

*“First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God’s will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, 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 well as among the rest of the Gentiles. I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith’” (Rom 1:8–17).*

## Sermon

If you lived anywhere along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea in the first century, you would have *felt* the power of Rome all around you [[1The Roman Empire A.D. 1st Century](#)]. From Hispania in the West, Palestine to the East, Egypt to the South, and Germania and Britannia in the North, Rome exerted absolute dominion. In cities and towns over a thousand miles away from the imperial capital, you would see images of Caesar, emblems of the empire, and, in most cases, the presence of the Roman Legions.

A Roman legion was composed of 6,500 men [[2Roman Legion](#)]. Many times the soldiers within a legion hailed from the Italian peninsula, where the city of Rome itself is located. However, as Rome changed from republic and into an empire, Roman soldiers were drawn from all across the vast dominion of Caesar’s control. Soldiers came from Britannia and Gaul and Greece and Egypt.

The big idea is this: the presence of such legions throughout the empire—as a multi-ethnic army, bound in loyalty to Rome—made the power of Caesar unignorable.

During the lifetimes of Jesus and Paul, there were four Roman legions stationed in Judea.<sup>1</sup> Their job was to enforce the rule of Caesar. They would keep the peace. They would quell rebellion. And if anyone ever dared to assert himself as king over against the unchallenged might of Caesar, the legionaries would crucify him.

In fact, in the year A.D. 33, after being accused of treason by Jewish religious leaders, a rabbi from Nazareth named Jesus was crucified by Roman soldiers. And if Jesus were just another political revolutionary, his movement would have died along with him on the cross.

But Jesus was not just another man. Jesus was and is the messiah. He was and is God in human flesh. So, three days after he died, he rose from the grave. Several weeks later, he ascended into heaven from where he will return. And he filled his church with the Holy Spirit to declare and display the good news of his kingdom! Soon, people from all nations began to believe in Jesus. Soon communities of Christians spread throughout the empire!

And, now as the Apostle Paul writes the letter that we read today, there is a community of Jesus followers in the city of Rome itself! In the same way that the Roman legions throughout the empire made the power of Caesar feel unignorable, now there are communities of Jesus followers all throughout the world that make the power of the gospel undeniable!

So, as we take a deeper look into today's text, I want to explore two ideas: **1.) *The Church of Rome, and the 2.) *The Power of the Gospel.****

### **1.) The Church of Rome**

Paul begins this portion of the text with wondrous thanksgiving: ***"First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world."*** (Rom 1:8).

Not only does Paul know that there is a church in Rome, he says the faith of this local church is known, celebrated, and *proclaimed* in all the world!

But how did the gospel already make it to the imperial city before even Paul was able to make it there? No one knows for sure, but there are clues in the New Testament. For example, from the book of Acts we know that there Jewish who lived in Rome who traveled to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost (cf. Acts 2:10). We know these people were a part of the crowd that heard Peter's sermon. And we know that thousands of people who heard that sermon placed their faith in Jesus and were baptized in his name. Thus, it is a very real possibility that those early converts returned to Rome and planted a church.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://byustudies.byu.edu/article/the-roman-army-in-the-first-century/>

Whatever the case may be, by the time Paul writes this letter, there is now a gathering of Christian believers who are faithfully bearing witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ! And their faithfulness to Jesus is being celebrated by fellow Christians across the world!

The church of Rome is a miracle of God! And, you know what? So are we!

A few years ago, I explored my ancestry through online tools and DNA tests. I discovered that I might indeed be the whitest man on earth. My ancestry is almost entirely English and Scottish, with a dash of Scandinavian. That's like ordering a scoop of homemade vanilla with a side of French vanilla to spice things up!

From a biblical perspective, what that showed me is that I am most certainly a gentile. My ancient ancestors did not worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They worshipped gods like Odin and Thor. They were pagan druids and astrologers.

I don't know when and I don't know how, but someone proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ to one of my ancestors. And now, I am proclaiming that same gospel to you in the middle of a wilderness on the other side of the planet than either Jerusalem or Rome! Now, we—from all our different backgrounds—have gathered to worship a living Christ who continues to change lives, even centuries after the church of Jesus Christ was first launched!

No wonder Paul is fascinated by the mysterious thing that is the church. No wonder he eagerly desires to be among these Christians and worship among them! As he says, *“For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God’s will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine”* (Rom 1:9–12).

Though Paul has not met many of these Christians in Rome, he *loves* them. Though he has not seen them face-to-face, he regularly *prays* for them. Though they do not share the same cultural background, Paul feels *bound* to these Christians with a bond that is deeper than any ethnic tie—he has been united to them by the blood of Jesus! Together they share a sense of mystical union in Christ!

But, nevertheless, Paul desires to be with them. He can give them his words from a distance. He can even pray for them from a distance. But there are certain spiritual gifts that can only be given and received in embodied Christian community. Some gifts can only be imparted via life together.

As Americans, this may challenge us. We can tend to emphasize and even idolize absolute autonomy. We are expressive individualists, and the idea of community makes us feel vulnerable. To be truly known feels like being exposed. To be accountable can seem threatening.

But you were not created for isolation. You were created for community. You were not created for absolute independence. You were created for healthy interdependence. Christian faith is not less than a personal relationship with God, but it is something more. You are meant to find a place of belonging and love within the local church.

So while I am so deeply thankful for podcasts, YouTube videos, and recorded worship songs, what I have learned—especially in this pandemic—is that there is something that is absolutely irreplaceable about gathered worship and embodied community. You cannot podcast biblical community! You can live without community, but you cannot flourish without community.

So, I encourage you, find a place of belonging within the church. Serve alongside one another. Be in gospel community with another. Support one another. Celebrate one another. Grieve with one another. And *pray* for one another.

On that note, I do want to mention that if Paul can pray for a church he has never attended and for people he has never met, I think it is especially good and godly to pray for our own local church. So, I know we are already a ways into the new year. But if I could encourage you to add a resolution: pray for your church on a regular basis.

Pray that we would be faithful. Pray that we would grow in knowledge of Christ and grace toward one another. Pray that we would reflect God's holiness in our lives. Pray that we would be bold in sharing the gospel! Pray that many who do not yet know Jesus would come to saving faith in and through the people and ministries of this church!

And that desire for evangelism is something that we see in Paul that I pray we can hunger for too. Look at the next few verses: *"I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, 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 well as among the rest of the Gentiles. I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish"* (Rom 1:13–14).

Paul was once a religious zealot; now his heart is for those who do not yet know Jesus. He was once a Jewish nationalist; now he yearns for people from gentile nations to be included among God's people. He once took pride in his impressive pedigree; now he will unashamedly serve *all* people.

The wise no longer frighten or impress him. The foolish, the low class, or the uneducated are no longer beneath him. The truth of God has exposed our common brokenness and frailty. The gospel has provided for our common need!

Now, in the heart of Caesar's empire, a diverse gathering of people has found a union and community that is only possible because of the resurrection of Jesus! This church is the colony of heaven in the land of death; the embassy of the city of God within the city of man!

What I want you to see is that a faithful local church is nothing less than an unlikely miracle that announces to a watching world that Jesus lives and Jesus reigns! The communion we share together is evidence that the eternally glorious God has intruded into human history. Our existence testifies to the reality that we have encountered the living God in and through faith in Christ!

Christ is the meteor—we, the church, are the crater of his impact!

Such is the power of the gospel (and that is the second and final point).

## **2.) The Power of the Gospel**

Paul writes: *“So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek”* (Rom 1:15–16).

Paul is eager to preach the gospel in Rome. And he announces clearly that he is not in any way *ashamed* of the gospel.

Those aren't just empty words.

In Roman culture, death on the cross was both horrific and humiliating. Crucifixion was a death that was reserved for only the worst of criminals. So, if you personally knew someone who had been executed by crucifixion, it was not something to be proud of or announce—it was something to be ashamed of and hide. If you knew someone who had been put to death by the power of Rome, you would not speak their name or celebrate them, and you most certainly would not worship them!

But Jesus turned the power of the empire against itself. Through the cross, he conquered. Through death, he defeated death. Through humility, he has been exalted and given the name above every name!

Through the cross, Jesus has made a way to end the tyranny of sin without ending us! The Jewish people were the first to hear this good news. To them, God had revealed himself in the very pages of their history. He had spoken to them through the prophets. He foretold of the salvation that his messiah would bring.

And, when Jesus died and rose again, he showed that he was more than just the messiah of the Jewish people—he is the savior of those who will believe from all nations! As it turns out, this was God's plan from before the beginning of time!

Now, people who used to be historically opposed to one another in hatred worship alongside one another. In the ancient world, people were often defined by their ethnicity or place of origin. But the first truly multi-ethnic church began to emerge in the city of Antioch and Syria. Their differences in culture and ethnicity still existed; these differences just weren't the most important thing about them anymore. Thus, the community of people needed a new name because they did not fit into the old categories

of Jew and gentile. So, these disciples of Jesus began to be known by a new name. They began to be known as “Christians” (Acts 11:26). Only the gospel can accomplish such a feat.

And for this reason, Paul is unafraid to go to Caesar’s hometown and proclaim the news that Jesus is king! He is not ashamed of the gospel. For it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

The gospel is not just powerful—it *is* power. It imparts resurrection life. It imparts the very righteousness of Christ through faith.

And that theme of faith is going to be a crucial concept in Paul’s letter to the Romans. As our final verse of the passage reads, “*For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith’*” (Rom 1:17).

The righteousness that makes us acceptable before God—the righteousness that gives us a place among his people—is not something that we earn. It is not possessed through our striving. It is not acquired through our performance. It is revealed from faith for faith.

We do not take hold of Christ. He takes hold of us. All we can do is come to the realization that we can do nothing. All we can give is *give up* the illusion we have something to give. We must come to the utter end of ourselves and say, “I cannot come to God, but I can trust that he has come to me in Christ. My work could never be enough, but I rest in the truth that Jesus’s accomplishment on my behalf is *more* than enough.”\*

Now, before we conclude our time, I want to draw your attention to the last phrase of this passage. It’s actually an Old Testament quote from Habakkuk 2:4. “The righteous shall live by faith.” That one little verse is from the book of a minor prophet. Admittedly, not a lot of Christians people know a lot about Habakkuk these days. However, we actually preached through the entire book just last year here at Redeemer.

Now, if you go and try to read the book Habakkuk, and you read what Paul is saying here, it might not make sense initially. But if you know the context of Habakkuk and *why* Habakkuk was written, it makes *perfect* sense.

Habakkuk is one of the last prophets of the kingdom of Judah, right before they fall before the seemingly invincible power of the empire of Babylon. And against this backdrop of utter chaos and the threat of exile—when all Jewish people were tempted to put their trust in the kingdoms of men—God tell Habakkuk that the righteous shall live by faith.

Now, Paul writes to the tiny fledgling church of Rome—who live beneath the shadow of the seemingly invincible power of the Roman empire—it is not an accident that he reminds this band of elect exiles that “the righteous shall live by faith.”

This, too, is our hope Redeemer Christian Church. It is the one hope that will endure. It is the one hope that will never disappoint us. It is the only hope that has the power to save!

So too, in our own age of chaos, as empires of men rise and fall, let us not be those who put our ultimate trust in the kings and kingdoms of men. May we instead be those who have the eyes to see the miracle that is the church of Jesus Christ! May we embrace our place within the communion of saints across the globe and across time! May know the power of the gospel!

And may we rest in the truth that the righteous shall live by faith!

AMEN.

## **Discussion Starters for Gospel Community**

- 1.) Read Romans 1:8–17 out loud. Summarize this passage in your own words.
- 2.) Why is Paul so thankful for the church in Rome?
- 3.) How might this passage encourage us to be thankful for and pray for our own congregation?
- 4.) What does this passage show us about the value of gathered worship and in-person community?
- 5.) Romans 1:16 is one of the most famous verses in the Bible. What is the truth in this verse and why is it so important?