



Romans
02 The City
January 27, 2018
Courage Church, Detroit, MI
scriptures: Romans 1:7-15, 2 Corinthians 9:10.

ROMANS 1:7-15

To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Longing to Go to Rome

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.

and even though we will focus on 16 and 17 next week, I do want us to look at the very first part of verse 16 which says:

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes”

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In around A.D. 49, **Claudius Caesar decreed that all Jews had to leave Rome entirely**. They were exported out of the city.

Claudius later married a woman named Agrippina and even adopted her son, Nero, as his own son. But **in A.D. 54 Agrippina poisoned Claudius Caesar**, and her son Nero took the role of Emperor.

This began a time known as *Neronis quinquennium*, “**the five-year period of Nero**”(1) - it was a time, for the most part, of peace and one where Rome was at its strongest and the best it had been in years.

And as part of this early reign of Nero, the Jews were allowed to *return* to Rome. But when the Jewish Christians returned to the churches that they had previously founded and been apart of in Rome, **they found them to be in a very different state than they had left them**, because of course, the churches continued on without them and the only ones that remained were Gentile Christians. Christians who hadn't been given the law, the ten commandments, who didn't understand the rituals, circumcision, all of that.

So they came back to what they would have been considered to be a very disorderly state in the church.

and it caused obvious divisions amongst people who were supposed to be united... The Jews didn't understand what happened to their church... The Gentiles liked the way things were going. And so there were problems.

Now, when that five year period of peace was over, things got incredibly violent, so the church in Rome would be up against a whole lot more, no more than a couple of years after receiving this letter.

Nero, who would live until A.D. 68, began persecuting and killing the Christians in Rome.

In verse 8 Paul starts talking specifically about Rome and his desire to go to Rome. He actually spends 7 verses on it.

He begins by giving thanks to God FOR the church of Rome, and then it says something very significant... it says "because YOUR FAITH (the faith of the church in Rome) is being proclaimed all around the world.

Now, this is very important. Because even with a divided church... the one thing that they still had was FAITH. And Paul said that THAT faith was being preached all around the world...

Why?

Well, first of all, BECAUSE PAUL WAS THE ONE PREACHING ALL AROUND THE WORLD and mentioning Rome everywhere that he went... and the reason for that, is Because they were the church IN ROME.

Let me try and help you grasp this... especially for those of you who have moved INTO the city from somewhere a little ways away... somewhere in the suburbs or something TOTALLY different than this place. You go home for Christmas and everyone wants to hear "what is it like in Detroit? what is it like living there? Do you think you will stay there long? when are you moving home?"

right? its a different world, and they can't imagine what it would even be like; yet there is this fascination around it. Especially if you have kids, and they have kids... "I CAN'T EVEN BEGIN TO IMAGINE RAISING MY KIDS THERE" - whatever it is.

Dawn and I have been a part of churches in a several major cities, and this one in particular has something very unique about it, so we have had lots of conversations like that... but here specifically... God has even opened up some amazing doors over these last few years and Dawn and I have had the opportunity to go and meet with tons of other leaders and pastors all over, and in some cases even teach in some of their churches in various cities, but none of those places have us out because OF US... they have us out because they want to hear about the work that is being done IN **DETROIT**.

Their eyes are on Detroit... they are curious... "what is it like there? What is going on there? is it improving? what is it like to raise your family there?"

They love to hear the stories because THEY ARE SO DIFFERENT FROM THEIR STORIES... and SO DIFFERENT FROM THE LIVES THAT THEY LEAD.

beyond that, especially for people in Michigan, everyone knows that the more that this city digs out of what it once was and is shaped into what it will be, the better everything will go for everyone else. As the city goes, so goes the rest of the state.

the reason that I say all of that is because sometimes we have to be reminded that the small acts of love that are done in a place that often is void of ANY love... it rings louder than you might think, and its impact is greater than it often may feel in a moment.

When we share the Gospel here, at times it may seem like it didn't travel very far, and its easy to beat ourselves up and be convinced of the lie that the work being done is insignificant...

but those reports go out so far beyond this place because people who aren't in the city ARE INTERESTED IN THE CITY. We often talk to Pastors that we know and they will tell us some of the ways that THEY ARE TALKING ABOUT WHAT IS GOING ON DOWN HERE TO OTHERS...

"I was just telling so and so about that Christmas thing you guys do"

"So and so was amazed when they heard how much you guys raised to buy that Courage house!"

"so and so wants to send a missions team down there and work with you guys"

I believe that it is a lot like that. Paul talked about the church in Rome everywhere he went because they were the church IN Rome.

Rome was the superpower of the world.

Rome was considered, by all measures, to be “THE CITY” - they had their own system for dating... we have B.C. and A.D. - those two actually stuck... but Rome for a long time during their reign at the top actually had their own system - Ab Urbe Condita - A.U.C. - which meant “from the founding of THE CITY” the idea was that time began when Rome began.

Just to put it into context for you, during Jesus’ days, when Jesus was born Augustus was Caesar and then Tiberias after him.

Now, for example, Augustus... the coins that were printed in those days had an image of Augustus, and on them were written DIVI, which meant “son of the Divine”



Those would have likely been the same coins or similar to those that Jesus was handed by the Pharisees and the Herodians (Matthew 22:15-21) and when asked if they should pay taxes, Jesus said “render to Caesar what is Caesars.”

but I think that there is something so much bigger happening in moments like these.

Think about this...

Jesus is handed a coin that gets distributed all around the world that says that someone ELSE is god.

And He is not threatened by it. (we talked about this a little at Christmas a few years ago)

He is saying “if Caesar needs to put his picture on a coin, and make it impossible for people to buy and sell without using money declaring that he is Lord...” If that is what Caesar needs to convince himself and others that he is Lord... let him do it.

So Jesus says, pay taxes.

But if you understand what taxes were in those days, you would understand that Jesus was not just telling them “give Caesar the portion owed to him” -

There is a much larger, Kingdom principle at play here. The message is not just “give Caesar his money” - the message is that: citizens in the Kingdom of Heaven do not need to rely on the worldly systems at all, because THAT was the system that was crushing people and oppressing people and using military force to get whatever it needed from people. It was a system which left people with nothing and forced them to RELY on THEM for bread.

Caesar would literally set up bread distributions in the streets for people after first ensuring that they could not afford the bread on their own... in fact one of the things that the poets spoke about Caesar that caught on was “he shall be a multiplier of bread for all people”

Paul talks an awful lot about encouraging one another... encouraging the brethren... encouraging people with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and especially for people who have to on a daily basis deal with the oppression of a government like this, who always had its foot on their back... who weighed them down so that they could be the ones who controlled them... I think its really practical that Paul encourages the church so often to find ways to be an encouragement... he says even here “I can’t wait to see you so we can mutually encourage each other... so I can speak to your situation, and you to mine.”

And I think there is something we can learn from that when we minister to one another, and to the people in our city. No, we aren’t up against what the church in Rome was, but our city is going through some enormous changes here itself... and for most people its really good changes... growth, economy coming back to the city...

but for every comeback story in our comeback city, there are going to be people who feel like they are getting left behind in it all. And IF it’s only a better world for a few people, then really its just a different world in the same place, and only a few people get to be a part of it.

The church needs to work against that. The church needs to be about reconciling the gaps. Israel thought that they were going to exclusively receive the love of God... but God through Jesus said “actually, MY LOVE IS FOR THE ENTIRE WORLD” -

When I look at Rome, and the rise of an empire, I can't help but notice that it rose on the backs of others who had come before them but who in the end weren't as strong.

But the Gospel says that Jesus is strong in our weakness... and that God will fight on behalf of the oppressed and will indeed have the final word.

Caesar worked very hard to make sure that all people relied on him for everything and held them down enough that they could not get what they needed on their own.

AND JESUS COMES HERE WITH THIS MESSAGE THAT IS TOTALLY CONTRARY TO THAT saying that Caesar is not our source, God is... and you can confidently give Caesar back the coins that he printed his face on because they hold no value in the economy of Heaven. God doesn't need a coin to take care of you.

Paul echo's that message in 2 Corinthians 9:10 when he says

“He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.”

He says: THE SAME GOD WHO GAVE YOU THE SEEDS and the BREAD IN THE FIRST PLACE FOR YOU TO SOW IS THE SAME GOD THAT IS GOING TO BRING A HARVEST FROM THE SEED...

Because God did not start a redeeming work in your life just to leave the project half finished...

and so the bigger idea about rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's is not about the money but about the dependency.

What reason would you have to cheat Caesar's systems, if they are not your source?

If you don't give it, they take it anyway. And if you do give it, GOD TAKES CARE OF YOU ANYWAY.

SO the question then would have become:

Is it Caesar who takes care of you? Or is it God?

So in the midst of this world in which Caesar was Lord, this group of people who went around faithfully declaring that Jesus was Lord in the capital city it seemed was causing quite a stir.

So much so, that the whole world was hearing about how they were being faithful.

But what happened in Rome, spread around the world. Because ROME literally ruled the world, (basically) from India to Spain and up to England.

And this is why I wanted to read into verse 16 earlier... when Paul says "I am not ashamed of the GOSPEL!

Because today when we think of "not being ashamed of the Gospel" in America, we tend to translate that into: not being ashamed to tell people how to live... or not being ashamed to stand up to behavior that we deem unacceptable...

and then from there that person would push back against us and tell us that we are judgmental... or someone hears that we are a Christian and they immediately categorize us in the same category with every other religious person that they have ever heard of, like the people who picket funerals and hold signs and stand on soap boxes and judge the world from a megaphone...

they may even mock you or decide to not be around you anymore. But with only a few exceptions, that is sort of the extent of Christian persecution in America.

But if it makes you feel any better about whatever persecution you perhaps have allowed yourself to believe that you face as a Christian in the 21st century, let me assure you that it was far worse for the Christians in the 1st century.

Peter was crucified upside down for not being ashamed of the Gospel. Paul was arrested and eventually put to death. He had already been in prison, had been beaten, had to be hidden and then smuggled out of Berea when a mob hunted him down (Acts 17), and he was chased out of Thessalonica.

All of the Disciples of Jesus, with the exception of John, all died martyrs for the Gospel and John was exiled to an island to rot.

It was the Romans who would eventually bring down the Temple, the epicenter of religion in Jerusalem. At that point, any sort of trust that you thought you had in the almighty would have been severely diminished because the government that had succeeded in every other way had now destroyed the one thing the Jews had left.

In those days, Rome ruled the world, and you bowed to Caesar. Whether you lived in Rome or not.

But the Gospel is the message that Caesar and his wars and weapons and armies that controlled things through violence and even murder... will ultimately be brought down by a King who has shown us that it is generosity that will win the world.

God loved you so much THAT HE GAVE. He GAVE everything on your behalf.

So *when* Paul says "I am not ashamed of the Gospel" - what he is saying is that **there is nothing Rome can do to him that would cause him to not share this news because it is the power to save EVEN THEM.**

and as we learned last week... EVEN HIM.

But the heart of that is so important. Paul wanted all to know Jesus. He didn't share Jesus with people to elevate himself above anyone else. In fact, in Romans 9 Paul actually tells us that he would be willing to be cursed, if it meant that others, namely, Israel would come to Jesus.

Watch what Paul says in verse 11, after telling the Romans that he is ALWAYS praying for them and asking God to make a way for him to visit them.

verse 11:

For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—

Paul has such a desire to go to the place THAT HE HAS NOT EVER BEEN BEFORE.

Paul had never been to Rome, he makes that clear even in the letter. He didn't found the church in Rome. He writes with this sense of a deep desire to go to this place that he had never been and meet these people that he had never met.

But Paul will never get to Rome as a free man. His dream is to go there and preach... to proclaim the gospel, and it never happens, at least not in the way Paul likely foresaw it happening. The last verses of the book of Acts does say that Paul was under house arrest in Rome awaiting his trial, and for two years he preached FROM HIS HOUSE to anyone who would listen. But there was no great crusade... no pentecost moment in Rome where Paul proclaimed a message and the whole city went to its knees.

we can make our plans, but the Lord guides our steps... and life does not always turn out the way that we want it to or the way that we plan on it turning out... and if we let our lives be weighed down by the things that seem like failures then its very possible we will miss what God is doing right in the midst of what seems like a really broken situation.

Paul never preached to Rome... but his letter to the Romans has shaped more for the history of the church than (possibly) any other book ever

written. It is responsible for Augustine's giving his life to Christ... it was a turning point for Martin Luther, upon reading the thesis of the letter in verses 16-17, that propelled him to post the 95 theses on the door of the Guttenburg church which sparked the protestant reformation and the split from the Roman Catholic church.

On a more personal level, Paul, chained to a different guard every day lead many of them to Christ.

but it was NEVER the way that he saw it or intended on it being. A sermon out of your house to a few people who happened to stop by that day for two years probably didn't feel that significant in the moment. Writing a letter to a church in a city you had never been too before probably didn't feel all that incredibly significant or world changing to him at the moment...

but he had no idea of that at the time that his letter would not only be read by the Roman church, but by EVERY SINGLE CHURCH from that point on, to this very day.

He literally just thought that he was writing a letter.

That should give us great hope.

Paul never got to Rome (except in chains) - yet his desire to go to Rome was to preach there because it was the greatest city in the world and he was trying to reach the world... YET GOD still used Paul to reach the world in a more far reaching way than he could ever have imagined.

But he never got there. and what that means for how we read the book of Romans is enormous. I really want you to grasp this because it's crucial for our study over the next few months.

That means that this was a church that he didn't have a personal relationship with, so it is written much more *indirectly* than say "Corinthians" was where he was very clear as to what their specific behavior was and why it needed to change to look more like Jesus. (Summarized from William Barclay, letter to the Romans, page 1)

This is actually very significant.

Romans is theologically rich *apart* from specific circumstances.

In fact, it is without a doubt THE MOST THEOLOGICALLY RICH, OF ALL OF THE WRITINGS OF PAUL.

Rome was the world super power. It was the greatest city in the entire world, and if you can influence the greatest city in the world, then you can influence the whole world.

That is why Paul, even though he does not have a personal relationship with the people he is writing here, writes more extensively than he does ANYWHERE ELSE. Because he knows what they are up against, and he knows what is at stake.

Essentially, Romans is the clearest view we get of Paul's theology completely stripped of circumstances that he has to speak to directly.

Yes, he knew about the divisions and would have had some idea of what was going on in Rome at that time, and the fact that Rome was the cultural hub of the world means that much of its culture would be existent in the places that Paul had been.

but it wasn't like Corinthians when he went and saw the mess that the church had let itself become with its off the wall use of Spiritual Gifts and how its morality was something that even the pagans would cringe at.

The reason that I think that matters so much, is because the reality is that Paul says some of the hardest, most difficult things that we get in the entire Bible here in the book of Romans. There will be things that we will come upon that we are going to want to skip right over and move on to the next thing. But it is crucial that we get to the heart of WHAT PAUL IS DOING with this letter, and why he is saying the things that he is saying because again, this book is the closest thing we get to a straight theological piece from Paul. These are things that were very important for him to get across to this church in this city that he had never even been too.

but watch this... verse 15 has always fascinated me, and really it seems to get at the heart of why Paul truly cared so much about going to Rome:

“I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.”

and I think that this is something we all have to really make a note of.

Paul is writing to CHRISTIANS. People who already know about Jesus... people who already know the Gospel! And yet here he says “I can’t wait to get there, and share the Gospel with you!” a couple verses earlier, he says that when he is there, he hopes that they can MUTUALLY encourage each other... with the GOSPEL!

I think that a lot of times we think, as Christians, that, especially in church... we need to move past the Gospel. Like, it's just the 101, and now we need everything that follows. But one thing that we have tried to do intentionally throughout our ministry here, is show you how even in the most detailed, deep moments we read in the Bible, the Gospel is at the center of it... because we can never hear that message enough.

Christians often fall into legalism, because they forget the Gospel. They fall into law, because they forget the Gospel.

They fall into anger, and resentment, and holding grudges against each other, when they forget the Gospel.

It is really easy to be mad at another person for something that they did to you, if you aren’t constantly being reminded of WHAT IT IS THAT JESUS DID FOR YOU... and what He forgave you of... and carried on your behalf to the cross.

If you forget the Gospel, then you read Romans 2:1-16... you are going to be a mess. If you forget the Gospel, and then you read Romans 1:18-32, you are going to be a mess. There is a reason that Paul makes the Gospel the central thesis to his entire epistle... because it truly is EVERYTHING.

And what we will find next week and beyond, as we really dive into the words of this letter and look closely at what is being said:

Is that it is impossible for the Gospel to be something that God has done for you, **but that he won't do for someone else who is different from you...** who sins differently than you do, who is from a different place than you are or of a different class than you are.

It is easy to fall into that, because again... it allows you to never change.

it even allows us to stay angry. It's easy to hold on to a grudge if you believe that God is holding it too. Its easy to elevate yourself over someone else if you believe that God thinks that that person is worse than you because of the things that they have done.

Paul gets really into this a few verses from now.

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Its ALSO very easy to miss the Gospel because we thinking that **the arms of grace won't reach to us and all that we have done.** But thats what makes the whole thing so amazing, is the Gospel says that it doesn't matter what you've done, Jesus still loves you enough to die for you, and He did. It doesn't matter what you've done, it matters what JESUS DID.

Paul was called out of the biggest mess that anyone could find themselves in with God, to a point where when Jesus confronted Saul about how he was acting he actually said "Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Not my people... not the church...

God accused Saul of persecuting God. And yet He still got ahold of him and transformed him, and called him to reach the nations. Not the Jews only, but the Gentiles.

That's the message. The covenant that God made with his people in the Old Testament, he is now fulfilling, through Jesus, FOR THE ENTIRE WORLD.

And the fact that Paul emphasizes the importance of encouraging each other in the Gospel is a solid indicator to me that we should be encouraging one another in the Gospel.

Sometimes even Christians need to hear the Gospel. Sometimes even Christians need to be reminded that they aren't who they should be, yet Jesus loves us anyway.

So as we close this message, and I know that this was foundational... I know that it may feel like we are taking this book pretty slowly right now, but its important that we breathe, and take in the Gospel... take in the love of Christ... encourage one another with the Gospel... because we are going to get to some things soon enough here... where if we forget where we started... if we forget the foundation - then the bottom could fall out on this thing.

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You may have come into this place and you don't even know how you got here... you don't know where you are going... you don't know your right hand from your left... listen... it is in that place that Jesus Christ said "you know what? let me take that confusion. let me take that uncertainty. let me take that disappointment. let me take that heartbreak. let me take the sins that have been weighing on your conscious for weeks... let me take that... and here... you take this:

take my love that knows NO BOUNDS, and soak in it for a while. Even as we get ready to take communion, and we worship together with another song... find someone and encourage them with the Gospel. We don't know where others have been this week... we don't know what each other has done... but we know what Jesus has done FOR US and we know that the same love that wraps itself around us in our darkest moments, wants to wrap itself around all the brokenness that fills our earth.