

A Praying and Gospel Strengthened Church

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's scripture reading is from Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 1, verses 6 to 15, as printed in the liturgy.

A reading from the letter of Paul to the Romans. And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people, grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

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 in my spirit 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 open 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.

[1 : 22] That is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, 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 in Rome.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Good morning, Christ Church. We are attempting to do something for the first time in our church, which is to preach this epistle to the Romans.

Last week, we got to know the author of this letter, a guy named Paul, who described himself as both a slave and an apostle of Jesus Christ. It's that apostolic, that unique apostolic authority of the New Testament, which is the reason the church must continually go back to it for our truth and for our life.

We also got to know the subject of this letter that Paul calls the gospel of God, or the gospel regarding God's Son. And we talked about this gospel as a brilliant diamond, shining in six facets that Paul's going to unpack through this whole letter.

[2 : 44] But the one subject of the letter is the gospel of God. And now today, we get to know these recipients of this letter, these Christians who are in Rome.

Now, how in the world did this church in Rome get started in the first place? It was 30 AD. Jesus rose from the dead.

Fifty days later, Jews had come to the city of Jerusalem from Rome. They were there with Jews from all over the world. And in that moment, the Holy Spirit was poured out.

And they heard the first Christian sermon. They heard the gospel preached by the apostle Peter. And they took that news back home with them to Rome and began to spread that news in the capital city.

Fast forward, probably in the year 42 AD, the apostle Peter went to Rome himself. And he shared with that great, large Jewish community there that God had sent Israel's Messiah and that Jesus had risen from the dead.

[3 : 47] And he was now the world's true Lord. And Peter would unpack for them everything that we have in the gospel of Mark, which is really Peter's own testimony of the life of Jesus to these Christians in Rome.

So Paul, he didn't plant this church in Rome. But even though he's never been to this city, he knows many of the people in this church. He loves them very much. He's planning to visit them on his way to a mission in Spain.

And so here's Paul. He's riding in the city of Corinth in Greece. It's 57 AD. And in three years' time, Paul is going to eventually arrive in Rome.

Not as he planned, as a free preacher of the gospel, but rather as a chained prisoner of the state. Paul will get there in 60 AD under a sentence of treason.

And eventually, Paul will be beheaded by the emperor Nero in 65 AD, followed very shortly afterwards by Peter's own martyrdom in this very city.

[4 : 51] So why is Paul writing to this company of Christian people in this great city of Rome? Why does he write to them his fullest letter, his longest explanation of the gospel? Well, Paul's strategic, right?

He knows that this is the metropolis of the empire. This is the center of the Gentile world. And if these people can come to a clear understanding and a clear conviction about the gospel, it will change the whole world.

That if Paul can come and get the center right, then all the circumference will eventually come right as well. And so what we're holding in our hands today is what Samuel Taylor Coleridge, great expert in literary history, called the profoundest piece of writing in existence.

And I hope we're going to explore it, at least the first half of it, Romans 1 through 8, over the coming weeks and months. And we're slowly working our way through the introduction of this letter.

And it's very tempting, isn't it, to just speed right past this introduction. Let's get to the body of the letter. Let's just do away with all these non-essential appetizers. We're ready for the entree.

[6 : 02] But that's not the right approach because Paul has some really important things to say to us. He never wastes any words. And this is essential material for us. And I think God's word for us today is this, that God's people need constant prayer for gospel strengthening.

This is what we hear in the Apostle Paul, that God's people need constant prayer for gospel strengthening. And I want to show you a little bit about what Paul says about God's people.

Here's Paul, this former enemy of Jesus who now calls himself a slave of Jesus. Paul, a former persecutor of the church who is now an apostle and pastor of the church.

We see in Paul himself the power of the gospel to change people. And so he's writing to these Christians in Rome because he wants them to know who they really are in the gospel.

And he wants them to realize this great power that's come into their lives and how they are seen in God's eyes as Christians. And so he says, you know, very much like me, you too are new creatures.

[7 : 14] You're new people. You have a new life, a whole new nature. And that's why he says in verse 6, this is for all of you Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

I encourage you at some point to go and read the final chapter of this letter, Romans 16. And there you'll find a list of names of all the people that he's writing to in this church. It's really kind of a list of all the different community groups at Christ Church Rome.

And you'll find there that these are real, everyday, ordinary men and women just like us. And Paul says, you're called. You've been drawn by God the Father to belong to Jesus Christ.

You've been joined. You've been united to Jesus and to his people. And that's what a Christian is. A Christian is someone who God has called you by name.

And because God has called you, he's put you into a very close relationship of belonging with his son and with his people.

[8 : 18] Jesus would describe this union with himself as like a vine that's connected up and giving life to all these different branches. The Apostle Paul's favorite description of this union is being in Jesus Christ.

And how is it that these Romans, how is it that we might find ourselves in this position of being united to Christ, belonging to Christ? How do we come to share in that status?

Is it because of a brilliant decision that we decided to make? Is it because of great works that we have done? No, the scriptures are very clear that we did not choose him, he chose us.

That we did not call him, but he called us. And what this means for us today is that you are not merely your resume.

That you're not merely your CV. You're not merely your family relationships or whatever other ways you might describe yourself. At a much deeper and more profound and important level, you all belong to Jesus Christ.

[9 : 26] You are united to Christ. Christ Church, do you know that that's who you are? Paul will go on and he says in verse 7, To all those who are in Rome who are loved by God, you're not only called by the Father to belong to Christ, but your basic identity is that you are loved by the living God.

Here are all these little community groups of Christians in this great imperial city of Rome. This city that's full of rival ideologies, rival systems of living.

And these Christians, they're meeting in one another's houses. They're meeting in the home of Priscilla and Aquila. The home of Andronicus and Junia. And they're living this entirely different counter-cultural life together.

Ready to be thrown into prison like Paul. Ready to face death for the sake of Jesus Christ. And why is that? It's because of the love of God.

It's not because they themselves are such amazing people. It's that they become the beloved of God. And that's what makes them what they are.

[10 : 35] And friends, like them, the eternal God has set his love upon you. You are the objects of his special love, of his saving love.

The same God who, at the baptism of Jesus and the transfiguration of Jesus, said to Jesus himself, This is my son whom I love and with him I'm well pleased.

That truth about Jesus is now the truth about you if you're in Christ. This is the one whom I love. Jesus prayed this way on the night before he went to his cross.

This is John 17. He said, Father, you have loved them. Meaning all those who will come to believe in me. Father, you have loved them even as you have loved me. And I have made you known to them in order that the love that you have for me may be in them.

So friends, you're not only called, you not only belong, you're not only beloved, but you're also a holy people. To all of you in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people, or some translations say called to be his saints.

[11 : 47] Now I want to be very clear that it's not like there are a few Christian people who are saints and the rest of us Christians are just plain sinners. Right? It doesn't work like that. It's not like there are a few unusual, exceptional people who've lived excellent lives of faith, hope, and love.

And the church recognizes this and canonizes these people and calls them saints so-and-so.

Right? Venerates them. Highly exalts them as Saint Claire, for example.

Now does anyone else here in this room have that word saint in your name? Anyone? Anyone? It's a bit of a trick question because the Apostle Paul says, well, actually you do.

Actually every single Christian is a saint. In fact, you cannot be a Christian without being a saint or a holy one of God. What in the world does this mean to be a saint, to be holy people?

It means that we're set apart. It means that we've been separated from everything that separates us from God. And that we have been separated to God.

[12 : 52] Separated to praise Him. Serve Him. Give ourselves to Him. Pour out our lives for His glory. Friends, you've been set apart by God and for God.

And I know in here we have many new Christians. Christians who are just starting out trying to develop new life-giving habits. Trying for the first time to fight against sin in your life.

And you're finding it really, really hard. It's hard. But what you need to know is that you're holy. That you have a new life.

That you have a new nature. You've been put into an entirely different position in this world. You've been called out of the kingdom of darkness. And into the kingdom of the Son that God loves.

Into the kingdom of light. And that Jesus has come to you and He's put His own holiness on you. Like a royal robe. And He's set you apart. So that you can walk in His way.

[13 : 51] And trust His truth. And live His life. So when you're fighting hard against sin. And it's fighting hard back against you. Remember that you're called. And you belong.

And you're loved. And you're holy. And now you must become what God has declared you to be. Now you must become who you really are.

Now you've got to take this objective truth about what God says about you. And you've got to make it subjective in your life. And that's what Paul is saying to these Christians here in this little Christian

church.

In the midst of this great city of Rome. In the heart of the empire. This city that worships and serves created things rather than the creator. This city that is suppressing the plain truth about God.

This city that knows God and yet refuses to glorify God or to thank God. Paul says your mission is to show the city of man what it means to live as citizens of the kingdom of God.

[14:57] Of the city of God. You're people called of God. You belong in Jesus Christ. You're loved by God. You're separated to and for God. And what do these Romans need?

What is it that we need to above all else being able to live out this radical countercultural identity? Paul tells us. He says in verse 7.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Now some of us just gloss over that like a throwaway line. It's just this friendly simple little greeting and salutation.

But grace is this great announcement of the undeserved kindness and the unmerited favor of God the Father to do for us in his son and by his spirit what none of us could do for ourselves.

And give us all that's needed for us to be able to say I'm called, I belong, I'm beloved, and I'm holy. God's grace gives us all these blessings and all these benefits.

[16:03] And what is the result of God's grace? What does this experience of the grace of God lead to? It leads to peace. The grace of God is designed to bring us to and to give us this peace.

God's grace is the fountainhead. God's grace is the river that's leading us out into this vast ocean of God's peace. And peace is the opposite of restlessness.

Peace is the opposite of strife and uncertainty and unhappiness. And to be at peace with God means that we are no longer at enmity against God.

We're no longer fighting against God. We're no longer wishing there was no God. No, the grace of God has come to us and it's reconciled us to a loving relationship with God so that we're at peace with him.

And being at peace with God, we can now be at peace even within our very selves. And being at peace with God and with ourselves, we can now live in peace with one another.

[17:09] Friends, do you realize all that you are and all that you have? You're the people of God who are called. You belong. You're beloved. You're holy.

You're graced. You have peace. What more could you possibly need? What more could you possibly want that God has not already abundantly provided for you?

Isn't it great to be the people of God? Is it great? Some of you are not yet saints.

You're, you know, it's great to be the people of God. And yet Paul's point here is that God's people, we need constant prayer. We need constant prayer.

Paul says to them in verses 8 through 11, I've been longing for years to come to see you and not a day passes by where I don't pray for you, I constantly pray for you. In verse 8 he says, first I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you.

[18:14] And I want to dive into that prayer in just a minute. But first I want to zoom out and talk about Paul's prayer life. Because Paul has been praying these Jewish style prayers his whole life long.

Paul would think about the prayer of Abraham in Genesis 18. Will not the judge of all the earth do right? Jacob's great prayer in Genesis 32, Lord I'm not going to let you go unless you bless me. Moses' great prayer in Exodus 33, Lord show us your glory. He would think about and he would pray like all Jews three times a day, morning, noon, and evening. Shema Israel, Deuteronomy 6. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. The Lord alone, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. That was the beginning of every Jewish prayer that led them straight into what?

The 150 Psalms. This great prayer book of the Bible. And friends, we would do well to learn these great biblical prayers and pray them just as Paul prayed them.

[19:16] And I believe that Paul was praying his noontime prayers when he was on that road to Damascus. And we're told that it was precisely at noon when Paul was meditating on this one Lord that he had worshipped and served his whole life.

The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And boom, all of a sudden he had an encounter with the resurrected Christ. He came face to face with the risen and living Christ and it shattered all of Paul's dreams.

And yet at the same time, it fulfilled all of Paul's dreams. And from that moment on, Paul would never, ever pray the same. And that's why he says, first I thank my God through Jesus Christ. From now on, he'll invoke the one God through the name of Jesus because prayer has been radically transformed by the resurrected Christ. Paul says it this way in Romans 8. He says, The spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship and by him we cry, Abba, Father. He says in Galatians 4, he says, God sent the spirit of his son into our hearts, the spirit who calls out, Abba, Father.

[20 : 34] What Paul is saying is that when the spirit of God's resurrected son, Jesus, comes into you, you now share in the sonship of Jesus so that you pray like Jesus and with Jesus, Abba, Father.

Father. So to be a Christian is to let Jesus' prayers just happen in you. Father, our Father, hallowed be your name.

And this is what Paul began to do in his hot, cramped workshop as he was tent making. He was constantly praying. When he was traveling on the sea and on the roads, he was constantly praying. The spirit of the son poured out in him, crying out, Abba, Father. And Paul, of course, as a Jew, he had these set times to pray and we would do well to do the same, morning, noon, and evening. And yet he says, I also pray in verse 10, at all times. Whenever the thought occurs to me to pray, whenever the spirit of Jesus is calling out in me, Abba, Father, that is when I pray.

[21 : 38] And when he would pray, he would express loyalty to Jesus and to his kingdom. He would call out, Lord Jesus, send down your presence and your power.

Oh, Lord Jesus, I need your protection. I need your guidance. Lord Jesus, I need your encouragement. Jesus, I need your hope. When Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 7 about all of his battles outside and his fears inside, don't you believe that Paul was praying, Lord, help me with these battles.

Help me with these fears. It's so easy to follow the outward course of Paul's life and just to forget this inward course of his life, this most important source of all of Paul's power, which is prayer. The life of Paul, the letters of Paul, that's just the tip of the iceberg that we see above the waterline. But what's underneath all of that?

What is undergirding and empowering all of that? It's this Jesus-focused prayer. When he says, when he writes, I'm working hard and I'm strenuously contending, I think that includes his praying for the people of God.

[22 : 54] I love what N.T. Wright said in his biography of Paul. He said, unless we step to one side from Paul's relentless journeyings and imagine him praying like this, praying as he and his friends break bread in Jesus' name, praying as he waits for the next ship, for the turn of the tide, the right weather to sail, praying for sick friends and for newly founded little churches, praying as he makes his way toward what may be a wonderful reunion with old friends.

Or an awkward confrontation with old enemies. Unless we build this kind of praying life into the very heart of our picture of this extraordinary, energetic, bold, and yet vulnerable man, we will not understand him at all.

And not only will we not understand Paul, but we won't understand ourselves. We won't understand our calling as Christians and our mission as a church to be a house of prayer for all the nations. To be devoted as the apostles devoted themselves to what? To prayer and the ministry of the word. Always prayer first. Always prayer first. Always prayer first. My wife pointed out this great quote to me the other day from John Owen, who was a 17th century English theologian.

And he said, A minister may fill his pews, fill his communion role, fill the mouths of the public, but what that minister is on his knees in secret before God Almighty, that he is and no more.

[24 : 28] That he is and no more. And that's why Paul will write to them in Romans 12. He'll say, Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, and what?

Faithful in prayer. And what is Paul praying for these churches? Well, I'd encourage you to learn how to pray for the church through Paul.

But he says simply here, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you. And Paul's the sort of guy who sings hymns in prison at midnight, so it's not surprising that his prayers are full of thanks. In Colossians, he writes that he really wishes that every church would develop and enrich this practice of just simply giving thanks to God. Whatever else you do, just say, Thank you, God.

And so he's thanking God, not thanking the Romans, not thanking them all for being great people and joining the church, but he's thanking God for making them Christians.

[25 : 25] God, thank you for planting this church in Rome. And what specifically is he thanking God for? He says, I thank you, God, through Jesus Christ for all of these people because their faith is being reported all over the world.

That is, the members of the church in these different countries and Christian people scattered throughout the Roman Empire are hearing that in the imperial city, God is at work to bring people to faith in Jesus Christ and to build his church.

And that is incredible that they're hearing this news because there's no TV. There are no newspapers. There's no World Wide Web. There's no phones. There's no ad agencies. But Paul's point is that the work of the Holy Spirit does not need to be advertised. It simply advertises itself in the faith and in the lives of God's people.

That when the Holy Spirit is poured out and revival breaks out in one single heart or one little group, no matter what the size, the news will begin to spread and curiosity will awaken and people will begin to say, what is happening here and how can I get in on this?

[26 : 37] And what Paul is saying is that when the Holy Spirit enters in and does a mighty work in the church as he's doing in Rome, God will spread the news. And that's the question for us.

Is the Holy Spirit so powerfully at work here at Christ Church? That our faith is being spoken of. That our lives are advertising provocatively, persuasively, the life of Jesus Christ.

Paul says, thank you, God, that that's happening in this great church in Rome. And then he goes on and says, God's people, we need constant prayer for something very specific.

He says, we need constant prayer for gospel strengthening. And I'll end with this. Paul's not only thanking God for the extraordinary work that he's already been doing, but he wonderfully intercedes for others about the work that God has yet to do.

And what does he pray? What does he pray for the church? He says, I pray that God would open the door so that I can come to Rome in order that something particular and special would happen in God's church.

[27 : 51] Paul wants to go to Rome not to see the sights of this capital city, not to meet with the emperor. Paul's not going to Rome for the pizza and the wine and the gelato. He's not going so he can ride a Vespa and gaze at the Sistine Chapel.

Why is Paul going to Rome? Why does he want to go? Because he wants to see these Christian people, and he wants to see this Christian church made strong. I'm longing to see you so that I can impart to you some spiritual gift in verse 11 to make you, what, strong.

He wants them to be aware that they need something. And what do they need? They need to be strengthened. They need to be established. They need to be built up and made more complete in Christ.

Yes, you become Christians, thank God. Yes, your faith is being reported, thank God, but conversion is not the end. It's just the beginning. If you come to Jesus and you become a Christian and that's the end of the story, then none of these epistles needed to be written at all.

These epistles exist because becoming a Christian is just the beginning. Paul says elsewhere that when we start out, we're just little infants. We're babies in Jesus Christ.

[29 : 06] We need to be fed milk, but eventually we've got to be weaned so that we can eat meat, he says. And we've got to learn to, we've got to be trained in how to walk like Jesus and talk like Jesus and pray like Jesus and become mature like Jesus.

We've got to learn to deal with all the hard things in the Christian life. We've got to learn how to deal with the world and the flesh and the devil. We've got to learn how to deal with all the false teaching that's constantly barraging the church.

Paul says, yes, we must evangelize, but we've got to be very careful that all of the converts we evangelize are strengthened. Because what will happen if we're not strengthened?

What will happen if we're not rooted and grounded, as Paul says in Ephesians? We're simply going to walk in a way that's not worthy of our calling. We are going to have our Christian testimony spoiled.

And the name of Jesus is going to come into disrepute because of the things that we're thinking and the things we're saying and the things that we are doing. So the best advertising for any church is simply strong Christians.

[30 : 22] The greatest testimony to the truth of the gospel of Jesus is found in Christian people who are walking in the way, trusting the truth, and living the life.

When Paul says, I'm longing to come so that I can have a harvest among you, in verse 13, is that harvest simply conversions? Or is that harvest these converts being built up and established and strengthened and manifesting the graces of the Christian life and growing the fruit of the Spirit in their life?

It's probably both. Paul is praying that he might come and strengthen them and establish them in their minds and their hearts and their wills. And how will Paul strengthen them?

What spiritual gift will he impart to them to make them strong? How does he intend to encourage them by his faith, as he says in verse 12? Verse 12, what's his content?

What's his curriculum? He says in verse 9, it's the preaching of the gospel of God's Son. That's it. That's the content. You don't believe the gospel and become converted and then move on to bigger and better content.

[31 : 34] There's nothing bigger and better. It's just the gospel of God's Son, the unsearchable riches of Jesus Christ, Ephesians 3, the whole counsel of God, Acts 20.

I proclaim Jesus Christ in order that I might present you fully mature in him. Colossians 1, it's the same thing everywhere. We need, if we want to be strengthened, we need to go further up and further in to the gospel, to believe the gospel in all of its depth and height and length and breadth, to press the gospel into every square inch of our lives.

And having done that, press it into every square inch of God's creation. And that's why Paul says in verse 15, that I'm so eager to come and preach the gospel to you who are in Rome, to impart to you this great spiritual gift of the gospel, of which this letter is one very long explanation, in order that I might make you strong.

It's these deep doctrines of the gospel that will stabilize you and establish you and ground you and root you. It's these deep doctrines of the gospel that will make you dependable, reliable, sturdy, and strong Christians.

And I just have to ask as we close, is that what you're praying for? Is that what we pray when we look around this room and we pray for each other?

[33 : 02] Is that what we're praying? God, strengthen us in the gospel. God, make him stronger in the gospel. God, make our kids strengthened in the gospel.

This is exactly what Jesus, again, he prays this for us on the night before his cross. In John 17, he says simply, Father, sanctify them by the truth.

Your word is truth. May it be so among us. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.