

Rome: The Salt Of The City

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[0 : 00] You will know that through the past, I mean I hope most of you will know that through the past several weeks we've been looking at cities, Jerusalem and Antioch and Ephesus and Corinth and Caesarea.

We've just finished three of the cities in the third chapter of the Apocalypse. So we have this week and next week in which we're looking at the two final cities in the series.

And the one we're looking at today is Rome. And Rome is undoubtedly one of the great cities of the world.

One of the cities which by looking at it, you can look at some of the newer cities of the world like Vancouver just to examine its history.

And the thing that I'm sort of mostly concerned about is what would it mean to be a Christian or to belong to a Christian community within a great city?

[1 : 05] And to contend with Jacques-Élouis that cities are the great counterculture. That this planet is God's work.

God has put us on it and asked us to live in faith and obedience to him. We have on the planet built cities where we can live independently of God and create our own environment and create our own world.

So that there is this kind of antagonism between the city of God and the city of man.

The city of man being the place where we can live independently of God. The city that provides for us the necessary anonymity.

Nobody knows who you are in the city. I mean, they may know you in a professional sense, but basically they don't know who you are.

[2 : 10] And unless you may take some steps to reveal it, they will never find out who you are. And you can live in the city all your life without anybody even guessing who you are.

So you're looking at one of the great cities of the world that attract... It's a very significant city in the...

A very significant city in the New Testament. I went to the pharmacist last night to get some medicine.

And as she gave it to me, she said, If you find out how to get rid of that cough, tell me, because I've had one for three months just like...

So I'm just about in despair here. Rome is famous because, as you know, it's spoken of in many parts of the Bible.

[3 : 19] It's the great mother of harlots. The great city which has dominion over the kings of the earth.

The Bible is interesting. Our city as a city is very concerned with prostitution. In which it focuses on those who hang on the street corners of the city soliciting business.

That's the great problem of prostitution in our city. The Bible is concerned with prostitution too. But not the people who hang out on the street corners.

The prostitution of the people of the city in terms of their selling their soul to Satan. You know, the city itself prostitutes itself from its true husband who is the Lord.

So you get that running through and finding fulfillment in Rome. Which is the great mother of harlots. Rome is the community for which it seems that the first gospel was written.

[4 : 36] That Mark was written to explain Christianity to the people of Rome. Rome is also considered possibly to be the city that contained a rather orthodox right-wing group of Christians.

To whom the epistle to the Hebrews was written to explain to them where their ancient Hebrew faith stopped. And where their Christian faith began.

One of the really interesting things about Rome is that there is no reference to a church there.

Now, Protestants delight in this, I'm sure. But there was a church in Corinth and a church in Ephesus. And a church in Laodicea.

And a church in Colossae. There were churches all over the Mediterranean world. But when Paul writes to Rome, he writes to the brethren in Rome.

[5 : 48] Who didn't seem to have been organized into a church. Now, I don't want you to draw any wrong conclusions from that. But it's one of the things that I think may help you understand the place of the Christian in the church.

I would love now, if anybody could do it, to look at Vancouver. You know, where we're told that 3% or something of the population of Vancouver go to church.

That is, they go to one of the established, defined, ecclesiastical communities that build Gothic structures on various street corners throughout the city.

And we're told that the attendance and support for that particular venture is at a very low ebb in Vancouver at the moment. But I'd love to know how many house groups meet, how many fellowship groups meet, how many people meet for Bible study and prayer.

How many people are finding a reality to their Christian faith, which is independent of any organized church. Now, I'm not against the organized church.

[7 : 00] I've loved it for a long time and it's paid my salary all my life. So I'm not going to say any nasty things.

But there is a reality to Christian faith in terms of the way people relate to one another. And the epistle to the Romans tells us quite a lot about that.

So that there is this kind of love-hate relationship between the city of Rome and the Christian community. Because the Christian community, undoubtedly, worldwide, historically, owes much of the spreading of it to the fact that it got firmly anchored in the city of Rome.

And from the city of Rome, disseminated to all parts of the Roman world and got established there. But it was the city of Rome that was accused in the book of the Revelation of drinking of the blood of the martyrs.

So it's this ambivalent relationship between the city and the gospel, which I think it's very important for us to understand, to try and come to terms with it.

[8 : 19] The whole of the gospel is presented in one of the most succinct passages in the whole of the New Testament.

When Paul begins writing his letter to the Romans in the first six verses, there is the whole story if you want to see what it is. It was in Rome that it was discovered that the gospel was bigger than the Jewish matrix from which it came.

And with Paul's letter to the Romans, Christianity emerged out of being just another Jewish sect into an identity all of its own, with some antipathy towards the Jewish community from which it emerged.

But that's the letter that gives you a kind of full-blown Christian community with a gospel at the heart of it, which is independent of its Jewish traditions.

So a lot of things came out of the time that out of the gospel being preached in this city of Rome. In Acts 18, we're told that the Jews were sent out of Rome in about 49 BC by the emperor Claudius.

[9 : 41] And that's when Priscilla and Aquila went to Corinth. And they left Rome at that time. But soon after that, Nero succeeded.

The laws of Claudius about the Jews were lost and all sorts of people started crowding back into the city of Rome. So that by the time Paul writes his letter, there's a great many Christians in the city of Rome to whom he speaks.

But it's still this sort of strange reality that I want to try and convey to you about what happens when the city and the gospel come together.

You know that this is one way that it's been described. Here is the city here, you see, which looks like this. But this is on a cloud, right?

This is the city down here, which we know as the city of this earth. And this is the heavenly city up here. And what happened in Rome was that Rome was called the eternal city.

[10 : 59] But it was because it was in a sense a copy of or an attempt to anticipate what would one day be the ultimate goal of the whole of human society and human history.

That it would culminate in an eternal city. And Rome was an attempt to build on earth what they felt ultimately was to be the consummation of the whole of human history.

Well, what happened to that idea was that in the last couple of centuries, this becomes, instead of this being a kind of model of what this ultimately will be, this becomes the model of what this ultimately will be.

And so the eternal city, as we understand it now in the 20th century, this is the reality right here and right now.

The transportation system, the sky bus, the buildings, the banks, the harbor, the luxuries, the travel, the tourism, all that's built into the city. This is all that man can ever achieve.

[12 : 09] And it may use this as a model out of which to build it. But this is the reality. So you see what's happened between then and now is that they used to aspire to this when they built this.

Well, now we've changed it around and the ultimate reality is the reality we know around us. Now, that's what makes the gospel so alien. Because the gospel still points to a transcendent reality.

It talks about heaven. It talks about salvation. It talks about the end purpose of God in the history of humanity. So the gospel and the city are always in conflict with one another.

It was interesting in Vancouver when the late Honorable Jack Klein made a statement that the press grabbed hold of, saying that we are losing our French-English tradition on which our society is built, and without it, our society will decay and erode and be destroyed.

And, of course, that wasn't well received in our pluralistic society when he said that. But, you see, I think that it's more than just certain Western cultural values, which we have incorporated into our lifestyle in Vancouver, that sustain us.

[13 : 42] Ultimately, it is the competition between the gospel and the city as to which one is going to win.

Now, the Christian community knows which one is going to win. I mean, that's our faith. That's what our whole life is about. Northrop Fry, who is one of the great English professors of this century, I suppose, and his book called *The Great Code* tells a story taken from the book of Jeremiah.

And he says that the king in Jerusalem listened to the book of Jeremiah being read to him. And as it was read to him, he took out his knife and sliced pieces off it as they were read and put them in the brazier to burn, so that when he had finished reading the book of Jeremiah, it was in ashes.

But as Northrop Fry says, within a very few years, the palace and the king were nowhere to be found. And the book of Jeremiah continues.

And it's that reality on which our Christian faith is based, that the gospel concerning the person of Jesus Christ is the ultimate reality to which we must relate.

[15 : 17] And that everything else is essentially very transitory indeed, no matter how substantial it may appear. So you come to look at this very insubstantial community, which is the church in Rome.

And I have chosen, though I suppose I could have chosen all sorts of passages, the one in front of you is taken from the 16th chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans.

And the reason I chose it is because I find it very encouraging. I find it encouraging because if you look through it, you will see that it starts in verse 1 with the first lady minister, which in the modern debate about ordained women is not an insignificant fact.

I commend to you our sister Phoebe. Then it goes on in verse 3 to talk about Priscilla and Aquila. Then it goes on later in verse 5 to talk about Eponitis.

In verse 6 about Mary. In 7 about Adronicus and Junius. About Ampliatus. About Urbanus and Stachys. Apelles, Aristobulus, Herodian, Narcissus.

[16 : 43] All names which come out of the kind of pagan context within which the city of Rome was built and from which the first Christians were drawn.

And it goes on and talks about Asyncretus, Philegion, Hermes, Patrobus, Hermas, Philologus, Julia, Nereus, Olympias.

And all these people are people who are committed and convinced and serving and believing obedient Christians who are living in Rome.

Scattered throughout the whole of the community. And that's how, in a real way, the gospel is present to the city of Rome. Through all these people.

Through all these people who are servants and apostles to the Lord Jesus Christ.

[17 : 47] And that's how the gospel is present. It's not present simply as an idea. It's present in the reality of the committed conviction of the people that are there.

And so that catalog of saints, which comes in Romans 16, helps me to try to understand who you are. Now, I don't know who you are personally in many instances.

But you may be among the catalog of those who know themselves to be disciples of Jesus Christ, whose fundamental task in life is to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

That may be what it's all about. And it could be what it's all about if we understood and obeyed the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But those are the people. And they're a wonderful group of people. And you would find it entirely entertaining and totally fascinating to get some Bible commentaries and figure out who all of them are.

[18 : 57] Because their background, their diversity, they were everything from slaves to members of Caesar's household. They infiltrated the whole city of Rome.

They were there. Those who were obedient to and serve Jesus Christ as Lord. Well, then you come to the section which you have on the piece of paper in front of you, beginning at verse 17.

And this describes two people. Two people whom I will portray to you perhaps like this. that there is one who is the straight guy and one who is bent slightly.

And these two people are illustrated in the text here. The first is the one who has been, and if you look at the text, you'll see where I'm getting this from, the one who has been taught the doctrine.

Remember when I first talked about Rome, I talked about the introduction to Luke's gospel may well have been to some very senior leader aristocrat in the city of Rome.

[20 : 27] And it says, when Luke introduces his gospel, he says that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you've been informed.

Most of us have information about Christianity, but we don't know what the truth about that information is.

And that's why Luke wrote his gospel last night talking to a grade 7 student. He said to me, well, how can I know it's all true?

And I just had to tell him, this is the answer. These gospels are written in order that you may know the truth. And to make up your mind about the truth of the gospel without confronting the gospels, the written testimony, is, I think, a waste of time in a pluralistic society like ours, which has, in a sense, taken the gospel stories, extracted from them what it wants, and left the rest as a kind of residue of uselessness.

But they together, in their integrity, present to you the reality of what the gospel is. So, Paul says that in the church in Rome, there are those who have been taught the doctrine, who are familiar with the testimony to the person of Christ.

[22 : 02] In response to that, they have become servants to Christ. You will see that they serve Christ. That's the business of their life, the consuming business of their life.

Their obedience, you understand from this text, is known to all. And Paul says the purpose of preaching the gospel concerning Jesus Christ is to bring people into the obedience of faith.

That is, when the doctrine concerning Jesus Christ is made known, the response to hearing that doctrine is to come to a place in faith of obedience to Christ.

That's how we give expression to our faith, by our obedience. Paul says of these people that they are a cause for rejoicing.

And he pleads with them that they will be wise as to the good and guileless as to what is evil. that is without any mixture of vice or deceit.

[23 : 26] You see, in the city, you learn about the reality of evil and you learn how to handle it and you, in a sense, know how to cope with it and it infiltrates all of our lives.

But, uh, Paul says that he wants the Christians to be, to be, uh, well, uh, innocent of that.

He doesn't want them to be involved in that. He wants their wisdom to be that they can practically do good, but that they're not proficient in the practices of evil.

Well, that, those are the people on whom, uh, Paul says, the, the, the, the, give expression to the gospel community in the city. Then he talks about the people who have been bent and they have been bent, you understand from these verses, by dissensions and difficulties who serve their own appetites.

Now, we live in a city which is very much aware and increasingly aware through the impact of modern psychological counseling of the disease of addiction which afflicts people.

[24 : 43] Addiction to the, uh, gathering of wealth, addiction to alcohol, addiction to tobacco, addiction to drugs, addiction to overwork, addiction to sex, that most of our lives are motivated by one or other addictions.

And the reason that the counseling business is thriving in our city is that people are having to come to terms with their addictions which are destroying them and through which they destroy other people.

Well, that's, I think, the same thing that Paul is identifying when he writes to them and says, that there are those who create dissension and difficulty in opposition to the doctrine which you've been taught.

Such persons do not serve our Lord Christ because they serve their own appetites. They are compelled to serve their own addiction.

And you know how our city is having to make constant adjustments to try and make allowance for the people who can do no more than serve their own addiction.

[26 : 02] And that much of the character of the city is determined by the people who create dissension and difficulty because of their commitment to serve their own addiction.

people and these people it says by fair and flattering words deceive the hearts of the simple minded.

One of the things that happens to you when you confront the gospel of Jesus Christ is that you're told to become as a little child and the great risk you run is becoming a little childish so that you become subject to the fair and flattering words which the theological word book says friendly speeches and fine words for fraudulent purposes.

And that's the way people are taken with a kind of innocent commitment to the good and are by friendly and flattering words subjected to fraudulent practices.

And so that's what happens. So you have right in the Christian community you have the breakdown between the people who are really serving their own appetites and those who are serving the Lord Christ.

[27 : 38] Let me show you what happens. On July the 19th 64 A.D. Rome starts to burn. And the story is that Nero fiddled and people generally I don't think believe the story.

But as time went by and Nero took advantage of this destroyed city to replan the city in a better way they began to think more and more that he must have been responsible for the fire which of the 14 wards in Rome 10 of them were affected by the fire.

We haven't got the ward system here but you can see that a large part of the city was affected by it. And the result was that the pressure came more and more on the emperor and the emperor decided he needed a scapegoat and he picked on the Christians and very severe persecution of the Christians began.

And all the conflict that was built into the Christian community came out and the people who had really appropriated the gospel and who had been taught the doctrine, who were serving Christ, who knew what the obedience of faith meant, those people were subjected to horrendous deaths at the instigation of the emperor.

Others turned them over, turned their names over to the authorities to be subjected to this terrible and fatal humiliation. But out of that, you see, what happened was that the Christian gospel had around it a community of servants, unashamed servants of Jesus Christ.

[29 : 37] So that, in a sense, the practical reality of the significance of the gospel was established in that city and from that city went throughout the world. You know, this was the beginning, really, of the Christian church throughout the Roman empire, was the reality of those who continued to serve Jesus Christ under the worst possible persecutions.

And so, in the contradiction between the city and the gospel, you know, the gospel has to be more than something about which you are informed. It has to be something to which you are committed.

And that commitment is not just to an idea, but to an idea that is present in a community of people who hold it and who together recognize their responsibility to be the servants of Jesus Christ in that city.

Let me pray. Father, we have a city and we have a gospel. And we ask that we may so clearly understand the gospel.

that we might know what the obedience of faith means in our lives together. We might unashamedly serve Jesus Christ as Lord in the city.

[31 : 06] And that we may see this city as an anticipation of the heavenly city. and that we may see your gospel take hold of the hearts and lives of people who together look for a city whose maker and builder is God.

We ask this in Jesus Christ's name. Amen.