

Where is God's Power Found?

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 17th of June 2001. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled, Where is God's Power Found? and is from Romans chapter 1 verses 1 to 17.

...lead to Rome, so they say. And certainly in St Paul's day that was probably true. Rome was the eternal city, the centre and capital of the empire and the height of world civilisation.

It was the ancient Mecca, the place where Roman citizens would aim to visit at least once in their lifetime. But it was also in 57 AD the centre of a thriving and also renowned church.

So St Paul says about it in this passage that he thanks God through Jesus Christ for all of you, the Roman Christians to whom he's writing, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world.

[1 : 11] No wonder St Paul was eager to visit. Not just because it was the capital of the empire, the height of civilisation, but also because there was a church, a thriving and renowned church there.

A church indeed not planted by him. Most of his letters, if not all of them, are written to churches that he has had some involvement in their establishment, but not to this church in Rome.

Paul had never been to Rome, so he's writing to a church that he didn't know, and mostly, I guess, people whom he had never met. And yet he expresses great affection and prayer for them.

He says in verse 9 of this passage that God is his witness, that without ceasing I remember you in always in my prayers. His aim to visit is made clear in the verses that follow, verses 10 to 13.

He's keen to visit so that he can share some spiritual gift with them, but also that they may encourage him, so there will be mutual encouragement and edification as he visits this church in Rome.

[2 : 14] But also he says that his aim when he goes to visit will be to preach the gospel there to them, to a church in Rome, to Christians in Rome.

No doubt he probably had an aim to preach the gospel to pagans in Rome as well, but also to preach to Christians in Rome, to proclaim the gospel to them.

Because Paul knew that Rome needed the gospel. Or to put it another way, Paul knew that Rome needed Rome, the letter that we're about to launch ourselves into.

About three years ago I had a week's holiday in Rome, and when I flew into Rome Airport I was met by arrangement by two nuns who were Italian and didn't speak English.

We sort of waved and all those sorts of things, and we worked out that we were the right people to meet up and so on. And so I was squeezed into the back of a little Fiat car, and one of these Italian nuns started driving.

[3 : 20] Now I think that she thought Fiat was Ferrari. And I think she thought she was Michele Albaretto, or a relation of his.

Anyway, she crossed herself, I suspect she prayed, there were beads hanging in the car, and by some remarkable divine intervention that I didn't quite understand, we arrived at a convent where I was to stay for the few days that I was in Rome, near St. Peter's Basilica.

Well, having sort of recovered, I set out to explore Rome. There are lots of churches in Rome. There are lots of other fine buildings as well.

St. Peter's Basilica boasts that it is bigger than St. Paul's Cathedral in London. So you can see the place on the floor that says St. Paul's Cathedral, London. It only gets that far.

We are bigger. We go further. See where the wall of this basilica is. And there were statues of Mary and Jesus and various saints and some people I'd never heard of.

[4 : 24] You can go into the Vatican just nearby and see the beautiful frescoes of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel. Pictures of things from the Bible and so on.

And again, numerous statues of all sorts of people. And then around the various other churches in Rome, you can see some relics of people like John the Baptist who must have been an unusual character to look at because I'm sure that he had more limbs than is the usual apportionment because I'd already seen an arm of his in Istanbul some years before.

And as you travel around these various churches, there are statues to kiss or floors to be prostrate on, stairs in one church that you're supposed to go up on your knees as an act of penance. There are always bowls of holy water to sprinkle, candles to light.

There are bowls for throwing coins into and notes if you're that inclined. In one church, there was a crypt stacked high with bones of old monks awaiting the day of resurrection.

Not a safe place to be on that day, I suspect. And everywhere you go, there are posters and photos and pictures and lollipops with the probe on them.

[5 : 40] Now, despite the beautiful places, my reflection at the end of the week in Rome was that with some few exceptions, one thing was lacking.

The Gospel. Rome still needs the Gospel. Indeed, Rome still needs Romans. But not only ancient Rome, not only modern Rome, so do we need the Gospel and need Romans.

So do we who think that we're perhaps not quite good enough for God. So do we who think that we're not quite sure whether God will let us into his heaven at the end of our days. So do we who think that the Gospel somehow centres and focuses on us and me and my sins and my eternal life.

So do we who claim to believe in Jesus Christ and yet live lives that do not reflect that faith and do not obey his commands. So do we who lack love and unity and harmony with our fellow Christians, both here and in other places.

So do we who do not know and struggle to explain the Christian Gospel to others. So do we who never share our Christian faith with others or invite them to hear the Gospel.

[6 : 56] So do we who might think that God is somehow distant or remote or that God is out to punish us and to dampen our life and spoil our fun. So do we who might think that God is perhaps ultimately a hidden mystery.

If any of that is us, we need Romans too because we need the Gospel too. Like a car with faulty steering that always veers to one side or the other, so through 2,000 years of church history, the church has been veering off course away from the Gospel.

And at every significant point where it returns to the Gospel, the letter to the Romans is influential. With Augustine in 400 AD as he rediscovered what grace is about.

With Martin Luther and the Reformation in the 16th century. With John Wesley and others in the great awakening of the 18th century. We too need Romans. The Anglican Church needs Romans.

The world in which we live needs Romans. Well let's pray as we begin. O God our Father, we thank you for the Gospel and we thank you for this letter that Paul wrote to the Romans that still remains so relevant and important for us.

[8 : 20] We pray that as we begin this sermon series through this letter that you may reveal your righteousness to us so that we can stand in your presence on that final day with confidence in Jesus knowing that you welcome us and find us righteous in your sight.

Amen. Paul wastes no time in this letter introducing himself. They don't know him apart from reputation.

So he says some things about who he is from the beginning. Ancient letters made a bit more sense than modern ones because the writer would say who he was at the beginning rather than the end of the letter.

So the letter begins with his name. Paul. A servant of Jesus Christ he says. Really a slave of Jesus. That is one who is under the authority of Jesus.

He knows that Jesus is not just his saviour but his Lord. He is out to serve and obey Jesus Christ. And that is fundamentally his self-identity.

[9 : 28] He is a servant of Jesus Christ. In particular he says he is called to be an apostle. That is a messenger. But also in particular a messenger who is a witness to the resurrection of Jesus.

For most of the apostles they would have seen Jesus after the resurrection before he ascended to heaven. For Paul it was more unusual than that. He was converted sometime later on the road to Damascus and called then to be an apostle in particular an apostle to non-Jewish people.

People called Gentiles. So he is a servant of Jesus Christ. He is called to be an apostle. That is to testify to the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ. He is also set apart for the gospel he says at the end of verse 1.

The word he uses probably plays on the fact that before he was a Christian and converted he was a Pharisee. And a Pharisee, the word Pharisee has the sense of being set apart in particular for teaching the Jewish law.

For St. Paul he was still set apart as a Christian but he was set apart for the gospel not for teaching the old Jewish law. And as we go through this letter in weeks and months to come we'll see some of the contrast between the gospel and the law of Judaism.

[10 : 47] So Paul is a servant, an apostle and he's set apart for the gospel. The word gospel you may know is often translated along the lines of good news.

But that can be a bit weak. It is good news but it is significantly good news. It is an important announcement of good news.

In the ancient Roman Empire there would be gospels proclaimed from time to time. The birth of an heir to the emperor or victory in battle. If we were to transfer that sort of use of the word to modern times the announcement that Everest had been conquered in 1952 or whenever it was that would be a sort of gospel announcement.

a great and significant even life changing world changing good news. And so the word is used by the early Christians to give that sort of sense.

Not just that this is good news that is it's for our benefit but that it is significant good news. And what is it?

[11 : 57] Paul makes five brief statements about this gospel in verses 1 through to 5. Firstly he says it is the gospel of God at the end of verse 1.

That is God is its source. God is its creator. God is its origin. It's not a human invention. We haven't made it up or Paul hasn't made it up or other people haven't made it up.

It is God's gospel. He's the one who orchestrated it and began it and devised it. And it's fundamentally also about him not us. that is that at the heart of the gospel is God.

God himself. Now you well know that ancient people thought that the world in which we live was the centre of the universe and everything sort of revolved around it or orchestrated itself around the world.

we've come to realise they were wrong. The world actually goes around the sun. So the centre that they thought was wrong. Well modern people often think that at the centre of the gospel is me or us, people.

[13 : 02] That is that it's our sins that are being dealt with at the heart of the gospel. And often you hear the gospel preached or written about and it is very self-centred. It's about self-fulfilment or what we can get out of God.

But at the heart of the gospel that is true is not us but God. It is a God-centred gospel. And we are only part of it in a sense secondarily.

The second thing Paul says about the gospel is that it is not new. He says in verse 2 that this gospel of God was promised beforehand through God's prophets in the Holy Scriptures.

That is Paul hasn't made up something new here. The gospel actually originated in the Old Testament as we know it and call it. That is way back in the prophets and even indeed before the prophets with the promises to Abraham 2,000 years before Paul and 4,000 years from our time.

So Paul is saying this gospel is not new. Indeed the Old Testament is the promise of the gospel and so in Jesus Christ and in the New Testament we find the fulfilment of those early promises.

[14 : 13] By implication Paul is saying that God is faithful to promises he made a long time ago. He's consistent. He's reliable. We can trust him. So firstly the gospel is of God.

The second thing is that it's not new. The third thing is that it concerns God's son. Jesus that is. That is the gospel is not a theory. It's not a philosophy.

It's not an ideology. It's not a political system. The gospel is about Jesus. Jesus the person. He is at its heart and centre.

And the things Paul says about Jesus here are key for understanding him in the gospel. He says firstly that Jesus was descended from David according to the flesh.

David was king of Israel about a thousand years before Paul. What he's saying then is Jesus is descended from David. That is he comes from a royal line, a kingly line. But also Jesus was fully person, fully man.

[15 : 14] He was a human being, a real human being. He wasn't sort of a pseudo human. He was really human. That's what Paul is saying. But also, he goes on to say in verse 4, he was declared to be son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead Jesus Christ our Lord.

That's a slightly complicated way of saying things. But in essence what Paul is saying there is that not only was Jesus human being descended from King David, but that he's also divine because he's now from the resurrection of the dead ascended to heaven and he is Lord.

A title that picks up a statement of divinity from the Old Testament. So not only was Jesus human but he was also divine. And at both sides he's a king.

Kingly descended from David and because of his resurrection from the dead God has publicly declared him to be or appointed him as in a sense king, God's son in heaven.

Again language that picks up all sorts of things in the Old Testament. So Jesus is fully human fully divine risen from the dead. Now those simple statements about Jesus at the heart of the gospel are still crucial today.

- [16 : 36] They're non-changing things and yet all around us we can hear gospels that are preached that deny one or other of those sorts of things. You see there's no place in the Christian gospel for the sort of equivocation we get from say the Archbishop of Perth about whether Jesus rose or not.

It is essential and central to the gospel that he did. Nor is there any place for the sort of heresy that the retired bishop Spong from America currently touring Australia has.

Jesus is fully human and fully divine. not just another prophet or significant person but uniquely God's son and uniquely God's son incarnate.

Well the fourth thing that Paul says about the gospel here is that it demands the obedience of faith. He says in verse 5 that through Jesus we've received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles.

what Paul is saying there is that the gospel demands faithful obedience. It's not an optional extra.

- [17 : 50] The gospel is not a take it or leave it. It's not like part of a big smorgasbord of religions and you can walk along and pick a bit of this and a bit of that or take your pick. The gospel demands that we respond with faith which in itself then produces obedience.

And that's why Paul wants to preach the gospel to Roman Christians. We might think well why does he say in verse 15 that he wants to preach the gospel to the church in Rome? Why doesn't he say I want to preach the gospel to pagans because they need to be converted?

He actually says I want to proclaim the gospel to you Christians in Rome because Christians need to keep hearing the gospel so that their faith produces obedience in response to it.

That's why Paul wants to go to Rome to proclaim the gospel to these Christians in Rome and that's why he writes this letter and that's why we Christians need to hear this letter as well. We need to hear the gospel so that it will produce faithful obedience from us.

Christian faith you see is not just saying I believe this to be true. Christian faith obeys the gospel. What sort of obedience? Well it will mean that we are loving people that we live in harmony with each other, that we love even our enemies, that we submit to governments and authorities in our society.

- [19 : 13] It means that we'll suffer patiently, that we'll be zealous to serve the Lord. It means that we'll offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God in response to his mercy.

That is where Paul's letter aims for. Chapters 12 to 15. It will take us some time to get there and we may forget about it in the meantime. But that's what is the obedience of faith.

That's why Paul writes this letter. So that the Roman Christians and we readers today will live lives of obedient faith as outlined in those latter chapters.

But we need to get the gospel right if we're going to lead those sorts of lives right. Hence the opening chapters of this letter as well. So the gospel's of God, the gospel's not new, the gospel concerns Jesus, the gospel demands the obedience of faith.

And fifthly, he says in the end of verse five, the gospel is for Jesus' sake. He says there that the gospel demands the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of Jesus' name.

- [20 : 21] We're the beneficiaries of the gospel. Christians are those whose sins are forgiven. Christians are those who receive adoption into God's family, the assurance of eternal life, the promise of God's love that will never depart from us and so on.

So it would be easy to think that the gospel's for our sake, for our benefit, for our eternal benefit. And though we are the beneficiaries of the gospel, ultimately the point of the gospel is for the sake of Jesus' name, for his glory, for his honour.

So that at the end of time, or end of history, all God's people, Christians, will gather around the heavenly throne and bow down before the name of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God seated on the throne of heaven.

That's the point of the gospel, is to bring glory and honour to Jesus Christ. It's not for us to wallow in the benefits that we receive, but rather that having received the benefits of the gospel, we may live lives that bring glory and honour to Jesus now, in anticipation that at that day of heaven, we'll be gathered around his throne singing his praises and glory and honour forever.

That's why the gospel's there. That's why God does what he does, to bring glory and honour to his Son, Jesus Christ. Christ. This gospel is what compels Paul to preach, to live, to write, to travel.

[21 : 58] This gospel is what controls his life. That's why he greets Christians in Rome whom he doesn't even know. That's why he prays for them regularly. That's why he gives thanks for them.

That's why he's eager to see them, to share spiritual gifts with them and be encouraged by them. That's why he is eager to proclaim the gospel even to these Christians in Rome. That's why he's prepared to suffer for the gospel.

That's why he's undergone stonings and rejection, imprisonment, false imprisonment, and towards the end of his life, martyrdom. For the sake of this gospel and for the glory of Jesus Christ.

He says towards the end of verse, well in verse 14, he says I'm a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish, hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

Why does Paul say that he is a debtor to these people? He hasn't borrowed money from them. Why is he a debtor to them? In a couple of months, as many of you know, I'm going to Nigeria for a couple of weeks to teach and speak at clergy conference and so on.

[23 : 13] And Jacob, who is with us this year, who from Nigeria, who many of you will know and heard preach, has asked if I would take some things back for his wife and his son Amos. When Jacob gives me those things to take, I become a debtor to his wife and his son.

That is, I owe them the things that Jacob entrusts to me to give to them. And that's the sense that Paul has here. The gospel has been given to him, but not as a possession that he can sit down and enjoy, but rather it's entrusted to him, so he becomes a debtor to people to whom he is to preach and proclaim the gospel.

That is, to Greeks and barbarians. That is, civilized Gentiles and uncivilized Gentiles, to wise people, to foolish people. He's saying, in effect, he is a debtor to anybody because the gospel is given to him, but it's entrusted to him to share.

Now, the gospel is always given to Christians in trust. Not just that we sit back and enjoy it and think, well, I'm saved, isn't that great?

But the gospel is given to each one of us on trust, and that makes us debtors to other people. Maybe not with the specific calling of Paul to be an apostle, but we too are debtors to our husbands, our wives, our parents, our children, our work colleagues, our schoolmates, our university colleagues, or anybody else who are our neighbors and friends and enemies.

[24 : 41] We are debtors to them for the gospel that has been entrusted to us. We are under the same compulsion as Paul to share the gospel. Three weeks' time we begin our Good News Week.

That is a time in particular when we are to discharge our duty as debtors to other people for the gospel entrusted to us. We are under obligation also to invite our friends to hear the gospel, to share the gospel with them, to encourage them to faithful obedience in response to the mercy of Jesus Christ.

We cannot shrink from that duty and responsibility, just as Paul doesn't, and gives us such an example for us to follow. Just like the game of pass the parcel that children play.

The music's playing, the parcel comes around the circle, you can't hold on to it, you've got to pass it on. We are under duty, under obligation to pass on the gospel, always in this life, as long as the music of this history is playing, before Jesus returns and the music stops.

So Paul says that he's under obligation to preach, that he's eager to preach, and then he says in verse 16 he's not ashamed of the gospel.

[26 : 04] It's an odd thing for him to say. It's odd at first sight to think, how could anyone be ashamed of the gospel? If the gospel is what he's just said it to be, the gospel of God, the gospel promised to the prophets, the gospel about Jesus, the gospel that demands obedience of faith and is to the glory of Jesus, why would anyone be ashamed of that gospel?

Why would anyone be ashamed of a gospel that brings us forgiveness and eternal life and adoption into God's family? Paul's statement in verse 16 that he's not ashamed of the gospel implies that he faced temptations to be ashamed of it.

Ashamed because of the scandal of believing in a crucified Jew who was a criminal, at least in Roman and Jewish eyes. That was a shameful thing to believe in the Roman world.

He was perhaps tempted to be ashamed because of the moral demands of the gospel. In a very promiscuous and liberal sort of society as ancient Rome, much like ours today, there was a temptation to be ashamed because the gospel demanded us to live moral lives that were different from society's lives.

He would face a temptation to be ashamed because the gospel is exclusive. It is the one way to God through Jesus Christ. Not one of many.

[27 : 28] You couldn't have Christianity in Roman world along with all the pantheon of the other gods equally valid. So there'd be a temptation to be ashamed of the Christian gospel because it excludes all the pagan gods of society.

Paul would be tempted to be ashamed of the gospel because it points to and acknowledges and exposes human sinfulness. All those temptations still apply.

None of them have gone in the last 2,000 years. In our day, there's every temptation to be ashamed of the gospel. We're tempted to be ashamed that we believe in a man who was a Jew 2,000 years ago.

Oh, surely that's a bit old fashioned now. We're tempted to be ashamed of the gospel because of the moral standards that it requires of people in response. Oh, you don't want to be practicing those sorts of morality.

I mean, really, we live in a society that's much more tolerant and easy going. Do what you like. If it feels good, do it sort of thing. We can easily feel ashamed of the gospel because of its moral stance.

[28 : 34] We can easily feel ashamed of the gospel today because it's exclusive of other religions. And our society is so tolerant and pushing pluralism that we've got all sorts of different gods, a bit of Christianity, a bit of Buddhism, a bit of Hinduism, a bit of New Age philosophy and this, that and the other.

But Christianity is exclusive. The gospel demands that Jesus is the only way to God. So it's very tempting to feel ashamed of the gospel because it confronts people who think otherwise.

It's tempting to be ashamed of the gospel because it exposes our sinfulness today. People like to hear things that they're good, that they're okay, that their lives are fine, that keep doing what you're doing, that people have got inner resources to improve themselves.

The gospel doesn't say that. So it's tempting to feel ashamed because we're saying that people are sinners and they need mercy. You see, the gospel is not nice advice for self-improvement.

The gospel is clear. Jesus is the only way to God. But Paul's not ashamed of that. He's not ashamed of it because he goes on to say it is the power of God to save.

[29 : 44] The gospel is powerful. The gospel of God about Jesus Christ is powerful to save people, he says. It's not just a pleasant path to walk down, something nice to do on a Sunday.

This is powerful stuff. It is powerful to save. And by implication, he's saying, nothing else has that power. Powerful to save whom?

He says powerful to save everyone. Jew and Greek or Gentile. The Jew first, he says at the end of verse 16, not because they're better or not because they're more important, because that's where it all began, with the promises to Abraham, the father of Jews.

Jesus' own ministry would affect that priority because he ministered almost entirely to Jews and just a few little excursions into non-Jewish territory. Paul's own ministry had the same pattern.

He would begin in a town in a synagogue, preaching to Jews. And only after that would he start preaching and proclaiming to non-Jews, to Gentiles. But he's saying here, the gospel's for everyone.

[30 : 49] Everyone of whatever race or socioeconomic background, the gospel is universal. It's inclusive. But it is for everyone who has faith.

And at that point, it's exclusive. It's not for everyone full stop. It's not for everyone, notice, who is good, respectable, decent, churchy, religious. It's for everyone who has faith.

That is faith in the gospel that Paul is describing here. Why is this gospel powerful to save? Paul then gives that reason in verse 17, the last verse we're looking at today.

For in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith. The righteousness of God means, firstly, that God is righteous.

He's righteous in his character. He's righteous in his acts. He's consistently righteous. That means that he will punish sin and sinners. That he will uphold and appreciate or bless righteous acts by others.

[31 : 57] He himself will always act righteously and fairly. We can trust him for that. But at first sight, that doesn't seem to be something that is good news.

Because when we realise that we're not righteous, to tell us that the gospel reveals the righteousness of God can be quite an intimidating thing. When Isaiah, the great prophet, had a vision in the temple of the holiness or righteousness of God, he cowered and said, woe is me, a man of unclean lips.

Well, so too might we, if that's all that the righteousness of God is about in the gospel. We'd be fearful of this God. Fearful of the punishment and judgment that might come to us because we're not righteous.

But, as Paul will go on to explain in this letter more fully, the righteousness of God that's revealed in the gospel is not just that God himself is righteous, but that his righteousness is given to sinful people.

How that's done is through Jesus Christ, and we'll see more about that in weeks to come. But God saves sinners without compromising his righteousness, without condoning their sin, without just brushing it under the carpet.

[33 : 11] That's where Jesus comes in, as we'll see later. Now, this is received in faith, responded to in faith. It's through faith that we receive it, and it's for faith.

That is, that the gospel of God's righteousness will create faith, so that we keep on living in faith. And Paul says, this is not new either. This is there in the Old Testament. He quotes from the prophet Habakkuk, the one who's righteous will live by faith.

And that's what Paul is arguing about the gospel here and now. This is indeed a gospel worth grasping. A righteous God making sinners righteous by the work of his Son.

We receive this righteousness through faith, and that faith is to produce obedience, which is why he writes this letter. Just under 500 years ago, a monk was pondering these words at the end of this passage in verse 17.

In the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith. He had thought that the righteousness of God was simply the fact that God himself was righteous in what he was and what he did.

[34 : 21] And therefore, like the prophet Isaiah, he felt a sense of, woe is me, a man of unclean lips in effect. There'd be punishment against sin and no hope in the hands of such a righteous God.

But as that monk studied these words in this letter, he realised that not only was the righteousness of God, God's character and activity that was righteous, but that God actually bestowed as a gift on sinners who had faith, his own righteousness.

And he wrote, Thereupon I felt myself reborn, and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of scripture took on a new meaning.

That man's life was turned around for eternity, and indeed through that man, world history changed, and we still reap the benefits of that man's conversion. His name was Martin Luther.

He was, perhaps humanly speaking, more instrumental than any other for the Reformation. That's from the Reformation that the Anglican Church began. You see, there's no telling what may happen to us when we read this epistle.

[35 : 37] What was true of Luther had earlier been true of Augustine and others, later true of Wesley and others, great and significant Christian leaders. But not just them. For 2,000 years, Christians have been changed by this letter of Paul to the Romans.

Today we've just begun what, for you, for us, may well indeed be a life-changing journey. Life-changing, because the gospel of God is powerful to save.

Let's pray. O God, we thank you for this gospel. We thank you for this gospel of Jesus Christ.

We thank you that in the gospel your righteousness is revealed. Not only that you punish sin because you're righteous, but because you bestow on sinful people righteousness in Christ.

we pray that we may be full of faith. And that faith may produce obedience. So that in our lives and in our words, we may bring glory to the name of Jesus.

[36 : 48] Amen.