

Faithful Faith in a Faithful God (Romans 1:1-17)

Let us pray:

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

I. Introduction: The Prodigal, part Two

What a relief, to get out of that house.

Ordinarily, Jude would have scoffed at his father's request to purchase farming equipment from the next city – a three-day journey!

But ever since Ethan, that rascal (you might even say that *prodigal*) brother of his, had returned, Jude could not stand to be in either man's presence for long.

So he relished the chance to forget about his family tension on this farming errand.

But now he was almost home, and the painful thoughts came rushing back.

“Dad has *changed*.

Perhaps it was early-onset dementia that caused him to forget the blessed closeness of our years together, alone, when I was not just the firstborn, but the only son.

Sure, I had never been perfect, but I thought that my father was finally proud of me. That, after years of hard lessons learned, I had become the man he wanted me to be.

And then Ethan threw it all away.

Actually, you know what, as it that weren't bad enough, dad threw it all away...for Ethan.

He received much more love than I ever did.

I used to get punished for much slighter infractions than throwing my entire life (along with our hard-earned savings) away!

I never got a *banquet* when I broke Sabbath...I got a *beating!*”

At this point, Jude's unpleasant thoughts were interrupted by the sight of the homestead on the horizon.

The first thing he noticed was the amount of trash bags on the front porch.

Not much later, the smell hit him. Odors he'd only ever experienced in faraway marketplaces, and therefore that much more memorable.

Barely believing his eyes and his nose, Jude took a closer look at the trash.

- Grilled pork chop remnants.
- Crusty booze bottles.
- Bacon pizza fragments.
- Ashen cigarette butts.
- The slimy shells of shellfish.

His blood pressure rising, Jude spit on the refuse-pile and stormed in the front door.

“Dad! Where are you!? He’s done it again! Brought his dirty Gentile friends into our home! Dad?!”

A very obviously hungover Ethan stumbled into the main room, nibbling on a piece of bacon.

“Jude! You’re back...”

And Jude **broke**:

“Damn you, Ethan! You *ethnoi*, you Gentiles!

- How can you continually scorn our father’s, the Father’s, **righteousness**?!
- First, you go and throw away your life and our life-savings to **run away with swine**?!
- Then, after the Father *somehow* took you in – adopted you like some bastard, orphaned children – ***you bring the swine back into this house?!***
- You think you’re so strong, so powerful, but you’re **weak**!
- You think you know who the Father is, what he’s like, but you’re **wrong**!
- We’re strong! We’re the firstborn sons of God!
- ***Who in the hell do you Gentiles think you are?!***
- ***If you really loved God, you would follow the Law and keep the traditions...***
- ***How can the Father love you? It’s embarrassing, really.***
- ***We never should have allowed you back into this house.***

By now, Ethan was boiling over as well:

“Damn you, Jude! You Judaioi, you Jews!

- How can you continually forget our father, the Father’s **grace**?!
- Don’t you realize by now that all your stupid rituals, all your hard lessons learned, were **a complete waste of time**?!
- We Gentiles and God have moved on into the **age of grace**!
- You Jews have FORGOTTEN the point of God’s grace, and so He’s practically forgotten you!
- We’re the firstborn, best-loved sons now.
- We’re the strong ones, and we outnumber you all at least three to one, so **shut up and deal with it!**

- You've SCREWED UP so often, you got KICKED OUT of your land!
- And you didn't learn any lessons then, because you got yourselves THROWN OUT of Rome!
- *How could Nero have let you back into this city? It's shameful, really.*
- *We never should have allowed you back into this Church, you..."*

[KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK]

Someone at the door.

The Roman Christians – Jew and Gentile alike – froze in fear.

- **Ethan** looked at the other **Gentile** leaders.
 - Was it a centurion?
 - Had their gathering been reported?
 - Would they be asked to bow the knee, to offer a sacrifice, to the new emperor, Nero?
 - If they weren't willing to do so, would this be the end?
- **Jude** glanced at his wife, their children, and the other **Jewish** families.
 - Had they already outstayed their recent welcome back to the city?
 - After exile, they'd spent four hard, hard years rebuilding their life in Rome.
 - Would they again be driven from their homes?
 - Where would they go?
- The **slaves** in the room – and there were many – anxiously retraced their steps throughout the day.
 - Which one of their fellow slaves had discovered their secret?
 - Had followed them to this meeting?
 - Had told their master?
 - Would they merely get whipped again?
 - Or had their master's patience run out?

Jude whispered to Ethan, "You're in charge here, get the door."

He trudged to the threshold and pulled it open.

A hooded figure stepped through, walked to the middle of the room, and pulled the hood back.

Long brown hair flowed down.

The woman said "**Christ is Risen!**"

"...He is...risen...indeed," they all stammered in reply.

She smiled: "**He is risen indeed. For twenty-five years now, in fact!**"

Greetings. My name is Phoebe of Cenchreae.”

Rummaging in her pack, she began to explain:

“I bring something for all of you from Paul, the apostle...

It’s in here, somewhere. Not this theology textbook. Not this to-do list...

Ah! Here it is, a letter.”

After carefully opening the document, she began to read the following words.

Now, her first audience didn’t have the benefit of reading these words off a page, but that’s no excuse for you not to follow along in your Bible, if you’ve got it with you.

Open up to Romans 1, and as I read these words, imagine Phoebe reading them for the first time to a room full of Roman Christians.

Reading these words like she was convinced they were absolutely true.

She began:

Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead,

Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the Gentiles, among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ,

To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called as saints:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

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 and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

Now, although that concludes the chunk of Romans we’ll consider today, Phoebe went on to read the rest of the 7,114 Greek words in the letter.

And, as far as we know, as the one to deliver this letter, she would have also been its first interpreter.

That is, she would have answered the questions of the first audience regarding what had been read.

Now, despite Paul’s wide influence in the early Church, I don’t think it’s unreasonable to assume that at least one woefully-uninformed Christian at Rome would have raised his hand and asked: **“Who is Paul?”**

I mean, Who was Paul, really?

II. From Paul

Well, as sister Phoebe mentioned, about twenty-five years separated the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and Paul’s penning of the letter to the Christians at Rome in 57, 58 AD.

If you wanted to find **Paul** in the same year that Jesus of Nazareth walked out of his grave, you might be a bit frustrated as you repeatedly flip through the “P” section of your Palestinian Phonebook.

Because, see, Saul, of Tarsus, is your guy.

And, like some others whose names have changed, Paul had a past.

He’d done some things.

And I’m not going to spoil this with some alliterated list. I’ll let Paul tell you about his past:

In Acts 22:3-4, he says, if you’ll indulge the paraphrase:

“I’m a Jew. Sure, I was born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up right here in Jerusalem, educated in Dr. Gamaliel’s strict, strict seminary to learn and live the Law of Moses. I was just as zealous for God as any Jew. How zealous? I persecuted this Way, these Christians, to the death! I’d throw any of them I could, men or women, into prison!”

In Acts 26:5b, 9-11, he says:

“I wasn’t just any zealous Jew, either. I was a Pharisee! [...] I hated and opposed the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Jerusalem was my first Christian-hunting ground! I asked my superiors for permission, then threw those Christians in jail! And when it was time for their death-row judgment, I always cast a kill-vote. Just for fun, sometimes, I’d try to trip them up in synagogue – ask them just the right theological questions to

get them to show their heretical cards. But deep down, I hated them. When they fled Jerusalem, I pursued them.

In Galatians 1:13-14, he says:

“You know what I did in my Jewish-only days, how I tried to wipe the church of God from the face of the earth. I was climbing the rungs of Judaism faster than anyone else my age. I was more zealous for the traditions than any of my old seminary buddies.

In Philippians 3:5-6, he says:

I was circumcised, I was as Hebrew as Hebrew could be; as to the law, a righteous Pharisee – no one followed it better!; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church;

In 1 Timothy 1:13, he says:

I once was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.

- A Jew.
- A Pharisee.
- A blasphemer.
- A persecutor.
- An insolent opponent.

Such was Saul of Tarsus.

And YET, here, Paul, to the Christians at Rome, declares himself, first:

1. A SLAVE.

NOT, as previously, to his own zeal for the traditions and the so-called “righteousness” of the Law of Moses.

But a SLAVE of CHRIST JESUS.

Taking orders from the one whose name he had previously and viciously endeavored to oppose!

Paul declares himself, second:

2. CALLED

NOT, as he had previously supposed, to persecute the Church.

But to plant churches! To serve the church as an APOSTLE, as an ambassador, as an envoy – with a message from his master, Christ Jesus.

A slave. Called an apostle. Paul declares himself, third:

3. SET APART

NOT, as previously, for the sake of the Law as a Pharisee, which literally meant “one set apart.”

But set apart for the sake of the GOSPEL! The good news regarding his master!

Paul wants to serve the Church at Rome by **preaching the gospel** there, in order to strengthen them spiritually.

This letter to the Romans will preach the gospel in his stead until he can do so **face to face**.

No longer a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.

But now a slave, an apostle, set apart for the gospel...Such was Paul!

****Quite the transition! Don't you think?***

It almost make us wonder:

“What could be powerful enough to transform someone like this?”

“What could be powerful enough to transform someone like this?”

But...c'mon, we're not studying Paul himself.

We're taking a look at **Romans**, remember?

And, while no one would have asked sister Phoebe this question back then, we need to ask it today:

****Who were the Romans? Who were these Christians at Rome?***

III. To the Roman Christians

Well, like everyone, name-change or not, they had a past.

At one time – the Jews and the Gentiles alike – were both **faithless**.

They were more or less groping along in the darkness until they came to know Jesus the Messiah.

Now, we don't know much about how Christianity first spread westward from Jerusalem to the center of the Roman Empire.

However, it was probably taken there by Jewish Christians - perhaps by the Jewish “visitors from Rome” who, according to Acts 2:10, were present at Pentecost.

Regardless, those Christians present in Rome when Phoebe arrived were, in general, **no longer completely faithless**.

After all, Jesus the Messiah had enough of a claim on their lives for them to risk attending a potentially unpopular meeting.

And yet, much like Saul had been **ashamed** of the Jews who had chosen to follow a crucified Messiah (...not to mention how much that Pharisee would have been ashamed of Gentile sinners!)...

Now, not just annoyed, or irritated. But

- Ashamed.
- Embarrassed.
- Disgusted by the very existence of something, because it is humiliating.

Come on and feel this for a second.

We know what it's like, **to look in the mirror, to look back into our past, and feel gut-wrenching shame – at our high-handed sins, our careless words, our lies and our lusts.**

Because we've DONE some things. We have a PAST.

Shameful, really.

Well...Much like the previous Paul, the Christians at Rome were **ashamed**.

First, they were at least tempted to be ashamed of a Savior who didn't exactly live up to the Roman ideals of **power** and **prestige**.

This was real, this was raw. It may have been a bit embarrassing sometimes, to walk by the huge buildings and striking soldiers of the Empire to go and worship in secret a guy who had been

- mocked,
- beaten,
- stripped naked,
- and nailed to a tree
- until he died like a common criminal.

Ashamed, of Jesus Christ.

Second, they were ashamed of **each other**.

I hope my, admittedly apocryphal introduction gave you at least a taste of what it could have been like to be a Christian at Rome.

Based on historical evidence and what Paul has to say at the end of this letter, we can surmise that the Roman church shifted from predominantly Jewish to predominantly **Gentile**.

Positively, this could have happened through **new Gentile converts**.

Negatively, Emperor **Claudius** expelled the Jews from the city of Rome in **AD 49** due to a Jewish dispute about Christ.

Acts 18:2 mentions **Priscilla** and **Aquila** as two of the Jews thus exiled.

With most of the Jews forced to leave the city, the churches would have become **predominantly Gentile**.

However, after Claudius' death in **AD 54**, the Jews began to return to Rome under the new emperor, **Nero**.

...To return to churches now led by and populated with **Gentiles** – Gentiles who no longer followed certain restrictions in the Mosaic Law.

- **Jewish** Christians were ashamed of their libertine **Gentile** brothers and sisters in Christ.
 - How could these people so quickly forget the Jewish origins of their faith?
- **Gentile** Christians were ashamed of their **Jewish** brothers and sisters in Christ, because they were *personae non gratae* – **unwelcome persons** – to many **Romans**.
 - They only increased the risk that the next knock on the door would be an unhappy centurion.

Ashamed and **divided**. Such were the Christians at Rome.

And yet Paul writes to them, to **call** them – as Christ had called them – to something **better**.

What was it?

The **“obedience of faith”** – and here Paul’s transformation links up with theirs.

Look at what he says in verse 5:

through Christ **“we have received grace and apostleship** (Paul’s transformation) **to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the Gentiles** (the Roman Christians’ transformation)”

Now, what does this *obedience of faith*, this obedient faithfulness, if you will, **look like**?

Well, to be honest with you, Paul doesn’t have much to say about this in these introductory paragraphs.

He’s starting his audience off on a long trajectory, but he does **return** to the obedience of faith at the end of this letter!

The exact phrase appears in the letter’s last sentence, in fact.

But the idea of obedient faithfulness appears a bit earlier.

In chapters 1-3, we see what the **opposite** of obedient faithfulness looks like. At the end of chapter 3, we see what **God’s saving faithfulness** looks like (...It looks like Jesus!)

In chapter 4, we see that obedient faithfulness still looked pretty similar in the Old Testament – with father Abraham, of whom it’s said in verses 20-21:

“No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in faith as he gave glory to God, (even before he was circumcised, mind you), fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised”

In chapters 5-8, we see various facets of God’s saving faithfulness as the foundation of our obedient faithfulness.

In chapters 9-11, we are reminded that there is **HOPE** for obedient faithfulness among the Jewish people, because God remains utterly faithful to his promises.

And, I suggest to you that Paul refers to this *obedient faithfulness* in the well-known beginning of chapter 12:

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship,”

or your “*rational service*,” or your “*obedient faithfulness*.”

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

In the rest of **chapter 12**, we find out that obedient faithfulness looks like **humility** (12:3-8) and love (12:9-21).

In **chapter 13**, we find out what **humility** and **love** look like when translated from another person to an impersonal government.

And then **in chapters 14 and 15** we get to the pastoral heart of Paul’s letter. The **Christians at Rome were letting holy days and food laws come between them.**

I find two verses of rebuke especially poignant:

- Romans 14:15 – **“For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.”**
- Romans 14:20 – **“Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God.”**

Here’s what I’m getting at:

Paul calls the ashamed and divided Christians at Rome to the **obedient faithfulness of UNITY.**

Consider 15:5-7:

“May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”

Think about it: this is a far cry from Jude and Ethan’s passionate argument at the beginning!

Again, we must ask:

What could be powerful enough to transform people like this?

What could be powerful enough to transform people like this?

The same thing that was powerful enough to change Saul to Paul: **the gospel.**

What is the gospel?

IV. Through the Gospel

Well, much like God's people, including Paul and the Roman Christians,

God's gospel **has a past**.

See, it was once a partial promise to the people of Israel.

Writing to his divided and divisive audience of Jew and Gentile Christians, Paul begins with the gospel's Jewish roots:

Look at verses 2-3: God had promised the gospel **“beforehand through his prophets in the holy [Hebrew] Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh.”**

- A Jewish mission.
- A Jewish hope.
- A Son of David, in human flesh.

But how is this powerful enough to **transform**?

How does this Jewish mission have a claim on the faithful obedience of the **Gentiles**?

****Because the Son of David is the Son of God.****

The one born, and crucified, in the weakness of human flesh, is **RAISED** by the Holy Spirit in the **power of resurrection!**

And this powerfully risen Messiah is the **LORD**.

The **Lord** over more than Emperor Nero's puny Roman playground.

He is the Lord of heaven and earth! Of Jews and Gentiles.

You know, merely crucified Messiah is a **poor** Messiah indeed – worthy of shame.

But a RISEN Messiah is a TRUE Messiah – worthy of obedience and faithfulness.

Paul is therefore not ashamed of the gospel, because he recognizes its resurrection **power** – a power to save and transform **ALL** those who believe – both Jews and Gentiles who trust that **Jesus Christ is who he says he is – the Son of God!**

Who trust that **he has done what he set out to do – to save and to redeem through his life, death, resurrection and ascension.**

The gospel is therefore powerful enough to save and transform all those who trust that **God is who he says he is** – which is to say all those who believe that God himself is righteous.

He is faithful to keep his promises – his covenants

- to Adam,
- to Noah,

- to Abraham,
- to Moses,
- to David,
- to Jeremiah,
- and to all of creation –

his promises

- to put the world back together again,
- to not let Sin and Death have the final word,
- but to raise his people from their graves,
- to melt their hearts of stone,
- to breathe breath, his Spirit, into their dry bones and lifeless flesh,
- to bring the dead back to life,
- to bring US back to life, read Romans 8!
- to make the faithless ones **faithful**, to make US **faithful**.

****God's saving faithfulness to all humanity – both Jews and Gentiles –
through Jesus the Messiah
calls forth, by the Holy Spirit, obedient faithfulness
from all humanity – both Jews and Gentiles –
to Jesus the Messiah.****

His saving faithfulness **demands** obedient faithfulness, and his Holy Spirit **enables** it.

God's saving faithfulness **demands** and the Holy Spirit **enables** obedient faithfulness:

So that, as Paul says in 5:21,

“just as sin reigned in death, so also grace will reign through eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

So that, as in 8:38,

“neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor heavenly rulers, nor things that are present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

So that, as in 15:5-6,

“the God of endurance and comfort [may] give you unity with one another in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

V. Conclusion: Obedient Faithfulness Today?

Now, I'm speaking to a room full of *seminarians*.

- We **know** that the gospel is powerful enough to conquer Sin and Death.
- We **believe** that the blood of Jesus is a powerful enough detergent to **wash away our guilty stains**.
- We **feel an adrenaline rush** when we read Romans 8:38,
 - because we **trust** that NOTHING will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!
- We **know** that's why Romans is so stinking long, why Paul couldn't just start with chapter 14...
- Because **we know** that the only thing powerful enough
 - to **unite** divided and ashamed Jews and Gentiles is the **gospel!**
- We **have faith** that the gospel is powerful enough
 - to transform Saul into Paul,
 - to unite Jews and Gentiles, to transcend their divisions!

*****BUT: Do we have faith that the gospel is powerful enough to transcend OUR divisions?*****

...Is the gospel powerful enough to transcend our differences?

...Is the gospel powerful enough:

To unite liturgy-loving Anglicans with Bible-thumping Baptists?

To bring together, in LOVE:

The contemporary and the traditional,

The “smells and bells” with the seeker-sensitive,

The 1928 Prayer Books with the 1979 Prayer Books,

with the “What’s a Prayer Book?”’s

The Lutherans and the Reformed

The Democrats and the Republicans

The Calvinists and the Arminians

The Blacks and the Whites

The Piperites and the N.T. Wrightians

The Latinos and the Asians

The egalitarians and complementarians
The rich and the poor
The paedobaptists and the credobaptists?
...the list goes on.

“Do not destroy someone for whom Christ died.

**Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of _____,
be it your prayer-book preferences or your theological idiosyncrasies.”**

See, Paul **could** have attempted to unify the Roman Christians by **turning their faith in on itself**.

By encouraging them to admire, as if in a mirror, the ***surprising fact that their diverse church existed in the center of a pagan empire!***

But he did NOT do that!

Instead, he maintained that the gospel reveals God’s righteousness

“from faith to faith”–

FROM the Faithful God

TO his *previously* faithless, but *potentially* faithful and unified, people!

FROM GOD TO US

That **order** is important!

Because it will not do to engage in ***ecclesiastical navel-gazing!***

We can’t just look at ourselves and marvel at the fact that

our diverse seminary exists in the center of a pagan empire!

No! We must look to Christ!

For he himself is our **peace**, first with God and then with one another!

If we look at one another, before looking at Christ, and try to transcend our differences on our own, then ***we will inevitably become ashamed of one another.***

Ashamed.

I can’t believe that God let some of y’all into his Church!

I’m embarrassed and frustrated by some of you.

Sure, on my better days, I'll admit you're my brothers and sisters.

But most days, we don't feel much like siblings.

Or maybe, we feel a bit TOO MUCH like human siblings, bickering and nagging and fighting.

And sure, I know I embarrass and frustrate some of you.

And if that doesn't apply to you yet, just wait! I'll get there.

Friends. Sisters. Brothers.

If we are on our own in this crazy thing called **Church**,

it's a hopeless, frustrating *mess*.

But if we trust that Paul knew what he was doing when he began with the **GOSPEL** in this lengthy pastoral letter to a **divided** church,

If we look to Christ Jesus and **trust** that the gospel is powerful enough,

not just to save, transform, and unify *them*, back *then*... but **US, RIGHT NOW...**

If we look to Christ and trust:

Then, TOGETHER we “may with **one** voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Then, TOGETHER we may “**receive** one another, just as Christ also received [us], to God's glory.”

Then, TOGETHER we may sing and believe the words of the following hymn:

You've got a handout with the words. Would you stand and sing it with me?

**The Church's one foundation
Is Jesus Christ her Lord,
She is His new creation
By water and the Word.
From heaven He came and sought her
To be His holy bride;
With His own blood He bought her
And for her life He died.

She is from every nation,
Yet one o'er all the earth;
Her charter of salvation,
One Lord, one faith, one birth;
One holy Name she blesses,
Partakes one holy food,
And to one hope she presses,
With every grace endued.**

Though with a scornful wonder
Men see her sore oppressed,
By schisms rent asunder,
By heresies distressed:
Yet saints their watch are keeping,
Their cry goes up, "How long?"
And soon the night of weeping
Shall be the morn of song!

'Mid toil and tribulation,
And tumult of her war,
She waits the consummation
Of peace forevermore;
Till, with the vision glorious,
Her longing eyes are blest,
And the great Church victorious
Shall be the Church at rest.

Amen.