

Rome: Center of the World and Beyond

Thomas Robinson, Cities of Hope 9, August 7, 2016

Romans 1:1-17; 16:1-6

¹ Paul, a slave of Messiah Jesus, a called apostle, set apart for *God's good news*, ² which he promised beforehand through his prophets in holy Scriptures, ³ concerning *his Son*, who was *from David's seed according to flesh*, ⁴ who was declared *Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Messiah* (anointed King) *our Lord* (LORD, Emperor), ⁵ through whom we have received grace and apostleship aimed at **obedience of faith** among all the nations (Gentiles) for the sake of his name, ⁶ including you who are called to belong to Jesus Messiah.

⁷ To all of you in Rome, loved by God and called as holy people:

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

⁸ First, I thank my God through Jesus Messiah for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. ⁹ For God is my witness, whom I serve in my spirit in telling the good news of his Son, that I continually mention you, ¹⁰ asking always in my prayers that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you.

¹¹ For I am longing to see you, that I may share with you some spiritual gift of grace in order for you to be made strong – ¹² that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.

¹³ I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I often made plans to come to you (and I was hindered till now), in order that I may have some fruit even among you, just as also among the rest of the Gentiles.

¹⁴ I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish.

¹⁵ Thus my eagerness to announce the good news to you also in Rome.

¹⁶ For I trust that good news never to cause me shame,

for it is God's power for deliverance to everyone who has faith in it,
to a Jew first and also to a Greek.

¹⁷ For in it God's faithful righteousness is revealed
out of (his) faithfulness (*pistis*) into (our) faith (*pistis*),
as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith." [Hab 2:4] ...

16:¹ I commend to you Phoebe, who is our sister and a minister/deacon of the assembly in Cenchreae, ² that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the holy people, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.

³ Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Messiah Jesus, ⁴ who risked their neck for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but also all the assemblies of the Gentiles as well. ⁵ Greet also the assembly at their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was Asia's first fruit for the Messiah. ⁶ Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. ...

Romans 15:24-25, 30-32 Paul's plans for Jerusalem, Rome, and Spain.

²⁴ I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. ²⁵ At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. ... ³⁰ I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Messiah and through the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, ³¹ that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, ³² so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company.

Acts 1:8 Jesus speaks to his disciples after his resurrection.

⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

1 Corinthians 1:18, 23-25

¹⁸ For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being delivered it is God's power. ... ²³ But we are proclaiming a crucified Messiah, to Jews, a scandal, and to Gentiles, foolishness, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, a Messiah who is God's power and God's wisdom. ²⁵ For the foolish thing that belongs to God is wiser than humans, and God's weak thing is stronger than humans.

Paul the Traveler from Jerusalem to Rome and Beyond

Jesus, after his resurrection, sent his disciples gradually out into the world – Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria – then “to the end of the earth.” That was not just a geographical, but cultural, racial, political, and social transformation. From a conception of God centered ethnically, politically, theologically on the Jerusalem temple, to a realization of God in and for all peoples in all lands. That was part of the ‘conversion’ that seized Paul. As a national Messiah, Jesus was impossible. Crucified! But if he was true/raised/alive, then he exploded the ethnic/political/class barriers and entanglements. He showed God creating a bridge of faithful love to all of his alienated creatures. Paul (with Steven, Philip, Peter, Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, Priscilla, Aquila and so many others) set out across the world (Roman empire and beyond) with that transforming vision. Luke records the story from Lk 1 to Acts 28, from Jerusalem temple to Rome. Paul's letters let us see inside events into the depth of spiritual power that could break hatred & draw people to God together. Paul knew it was not a human vision or plan; it was an utterly surprising event – Jesus! – who confronted people with a reality of God they could never have imagined: Good News, powerful! And Jesus never became past history, but was present/experienced in the work of God's Spirit.

People, Races, Funds, Dangers

Thus Paul intensely desired to go to Rome and beyond, to Spain. After that, who knows? Paul has been taken by Jesus for a long time, when he writes Romans from Corinth in ad 56. His vision is deep and high. But also he has been involved in peoples' lives as Jesus transformed them. He knows the diversity, the conflicts and dangers that can arise. He knows how hard it is to let the reality of God's grace really remake human relationships and purposes, and shape institutions. Everyday life has to change. Greeks, Barbarians & Jews must work side by side. Wise and foolish must talk and laugh together as friends. Fears, separation, culture must be overcome. He has worked gathering an offering of money from Gentile believers to help Jews back in Jerusalem. This theology comes to reality in individuals and communities. Writing to Rome he concludes this theological letter with greetings to many individuals – each a story, a transformation, a life. Epaenetus, first believer. Maria mission worker. Phoebe, deacon, patron. Prisca & Aquila are Jews back in Rome after Claudius' death in ad 54. Now the church again joins Gentiles & Jews. God chose to come in a vulnerable human, and Paul and his plans are no less vulnerable. Always danger, rejection. Vulnerability has to be lived out with Jesus' grace and love. Pray for travels.

God's Faithfulness calls all the Peoples he Created into a Life of Trust

Paul's longing to come to Rome leads to the heart of his letter. The church is already there; Paul is a debtor in God's great enterprise – the Good News/Gospel. They're united by the Spirit's work, their faith in Jesus, who embodies God's faithfulness/righteousness as he keeps his promises. Rome (like society today) was a caldron of conflicting groups, bound by power of empire. Jesus embodied a reality of trust, grace, self-giving love, under a faithful God – God's power/deliverance to new life. Lasting power! Paul learned to trust God's work in that Gospel. It never shamed him!