

# Paul's Heart

Romans 1:8-15

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We live in a very different world than Paul lived in. We are used to being able to remain in contact with pretty much anyone on the planet at any time, often through a variety of different means. The pandemic caused this to increase dramatically, and the proliferation of video chatting and livestreaming has exploded. If you are of a certain age, you can remember a time when that wasn't the case. Just 20 years ago, most people didn't have access to the internet on their phones, and even if they could access it, they wouldn't, due to the cost of doing so. Just 30 years ago, very few people even had cell phones, meaning that if you wanted to talk to someone, you would have to be at a landline and the other person would have to be at a landline, and you had to know what number the other person would be at. As recently as 1960, we didn't have a reliable means of having telephone communication across the oceans. Even the telegraph has only been around for a little over 200 years.

As such, it is sometimes hard for us to imagine the world in which Paul lived. Communication between cities could take months. Paul might write a letter to a group of people and not hear anything for a very long time. If he was traveling, it would take even longer for word to reach him. This is why Paul relished any news he heard of Christians in other places, and why he traveled great distances to visit them in person. Understanding this dynamic will give us a greater understanding of what Paul wrote to the Roman church in our passage this morning.

## Paul's Love for the Romans

Though much of the book of Romans reads like a logical argument, explaining the gospel message, these opening verses are much more personal in nature, and give us a picture of Paul's reason for writing. Sometimes Paul wrote to offer correction to churches, other times to address specific issues or answer questions. Here, it seems, Paul wished to encourage the Roman believers and give them a clear understanding of what the gospel was all about.

In verses 8 and 9, Paul expresses his love for the Roman church.

<sup>8</sup> Let me say first that I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith in him is being talked about all over the world. <sup>9</sup> God knows how often I pray for you. Day and night I bring you and your needs in prayer to God, whom I serve with all my heart by spreading the Good News about his Son. (Romans 1:8-9, NLT)

Paul said he thanked God for these Christians in Rome, because their faith was being talked about all over the world. There are a few elements that are important to note.

**First, Paul commended their faith.** He said their faith was being talked about all over the world. He certainly wasn't saying that literally the entire world had spoken of their

faith, but rather that everywhere he traveled (and he traveled extensively and widely!) people were talking about the faith of this church in Rome. It is not difficult to understand why. Rome was the center of the empire, and it was a place of decadence, indulgence, and godlessness. The fact that there were people living in noticeably different ways from the rest of Rome would be something others would quickly take notice of. The Christians in Rome, simply by being faithful to the Lord, garnered the attention of visitors, who would carry the message back home. Paul wanted to encourage these believers by letting them know that their faithfulness was being noticed and making an impact.

This does raise a question though. What about their faith was Paul commending? What does Paul even mean when he talks about faith?

People have varied ideas about what faith means. For some, it is simply a belief they hold. For others, it is almost like a club in which you maintain membership. For others, it means simply wishful thinking. When Paul spoke of faith, he was referring to belief in Jesus that went beyond just a mental agreement to the facts of the resurrection. Biblical faith agrees with the facts about Jesus, but it moves beyond that to allowing those beliefs to direct the way we live. This is what had gotten the attention of people around the world and brought joy to Paul—these people were putting the gospel into practice. The way they lived stood in stark contrast to the world around them, and people were taking notice.

Note what Paul did not commend them for. He did not commend them because of their success, their numerical growth, or their programs. He commended them for their faith, and the fact that their faith translated into action that drew the attention of others.

When people talk about the Union Church, what do they say? If someone new to town were to ask about “that yellow church” what would the people of the community tell them? We should strive to be like the Roman church—that people would say, “Those people really believe in the Bible. You can tell by the way they live. They’re kind, they’re loving, and you’ll see them everywhere in the community. You should be able to pick them out pretty easily, just by the way they live.” That should be our goal as Christians, and as a church.

**The second thing we should note is that Paul didn’t plant this church!** Paul planted many churches. He would come to a new city and begin teaching people about Jesus. As people began coming to faith, Paul disciplined them until there was a core group of people who could continue the work in their city on their own. Many of Paul’s letters were written to encourage (and at times, correct) the churches he had planted. But the church in Rome was not a result of Paul’s work. Rather than being threatened by this, he rejoiced! Christians should be excited to hear of the faithfulness and progress of believers anywhere, regardless of whether it has any direct connection to us or not. That is not difficult when we hear about the gospel spreading in places like China or Russia. Somehow, we find rejoicing more difficult when we hear of places making an impact in the next town over, or down the street. We must remember whose team we

are on! We are on God's team—not the other way around. As such, we should rejoice anywhere we see the gospel being lived out and impacting others—not only when it's something we can take credit for.

**Third, Paul shows his love through intercessory prayer.** Paul told the Romans he prayed for them day and night. He lifted their needs to God over and over again. Remember, this is a group of people Paul hadn't even met yet! But Paul loved them so much that he devoted great time to prayer for them.

One of the greatest acts of love we can show for another person is to spend time petitioning our God for them in prayer. So often we feel helpless when we hear about a person or a church in need. We feel compassion for these people but unable to meet their needs. Sometimes we resign ourselves by saying, well, all I can do is pray for them. The sad reality is that often when we say that, we don't even do it! I believe that is because we don't think that praying for people is a big deal. It is! We are coming before the King of the universe with our requests. We are petitioning the One who has the ability to meet needs and effect change. And yet, for many of us, our prayer lives are anemic. We do not wrestle with anything in prayer, let alone praying diligently for people we've never even met. Paul, however, was a living example of what James said,

The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results. (James 5:16b, NLT)

I don't know how exactly prayer works, but it does. Sometimes God acts in grand and miraculous ways in response to our prayers. Other times, when we pray, God uses that to change our perspective, to realign our priorities, or give us direction. Whatever He does, we will *always* find that time spent with the Lord in prayer is worth it and ultimately leads to a better outcome. We may not see results immediately, but that doesn't mean God isn't working. Sometimes He is doing things behind the scenes that we know nothing about. Paul was diligent in his prayers for the Romans. He didn't just pray for them once, but he continually lifted them in prayer. I love the idea of the PUSH principle for prayer. PUSH stands for Pray Until Something Happens. One of the greatest gifts we can give to another is to spend time earnestly praying for them—just as Paul did for the Romans. We never know what the Lord may do to answer our prayers, but we do know He can answer them in ways no one else can. As such, it makes sense to come to Him, continually asking Him to do something, until we see Him do something.

## **Paul's Desire**

In the second section of this passage, Paul speaks of his desire to visit the church in Rome.

<sup>10</sup> One of the things I always pray for is the opportunity, God willing, to come at last to see you. <sup>11</sup> For I long to visit you so I can bring you some spiritual gift that will help you grow strong in the Lord. <sup>12</sup> When we get together, I want to encourage you in your faith, but I also want to be encouraged by yours. <sup>13</sup> I want you to know, dear brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to visit you, but I was prevented until now. I want to work among you and see spiritual fruit, just as I have seen among other Gentiles. <sup>14</sup> For I have a great sense of obligation to

people in both the civilized world and the rest of the world, to the educated and uneducated alike. <sup>15</sup> So I am eager to come to you in Rome, too, to preach the Good News. (Romans 1:10-15, NLT)

Paul said that he had frequently prayed for the opportunity to come and visit them there. He gave three reasons for wanting to visit. **The first was to encourage them in their faith.** Paul saw these people who were growing and serving the Lord. He couldn't take credit for it, but he wanted to do what he could to help them continue their work. Paul was a masterful teacher and evangelist, so there was surely much he would be able to teach these young believers, and he desired to help them.

When Paul said he longed to bring them some spiritual gift, we don't know exactly what he had in mind. Maybe he was going to be able to grant them some special ability through the power of the Holy Spirit. But in my mind, it is more likely that Paul hoped to bring them spiritual blessing by encouraging them, helping them to grow and deepen, and guiding them to the next steps in their faith.

This should always be our goal as believers. Every believer should be working to build up other believers. If you have been a Christian for a while, you have a responsibility to help younger believers grow in their walk with God. Think about the lessons you've learned that you wished you knew when you first came to know Jesus. Share those things with others, so they can learn them more easily than you did! Paul understood that his responsibility was to help others grow. We sometimes think discipleship is the job of the "professionals" like pastors, scholars, and the like. Or worse, we think they are the only people who have anything to teach at all! Nothing could be further from the truth. We each have a responsibility to encourage, instruct, pray for, and build up one another. Paul desired to do this for the Romans, and it should be our desire for each other as well.

**Paul's second desire was to be encouraged in his faith.** Sometimes we think Paul had it all together and was kind of a "lone ranger" who didn't need anyone else. But the reality is that Paul drew great encouragement from seeing other believers serving faithfully. He was propelled forward when he saw people putting his teaching into practice.

If you've ever spent time teaching or pouring into others, you've hopefully had a chance to experience the encouragement that comes from seeing them grow and flourish. I have worked with students for 20 years now, and one of the benefits of that is getting to see some of the long-term effects of ministry. While I can in no way take credit for the things these individuals have done as they've gone off on their own, it brings me great joy to see children I've cared about, invested in, and prayed for become adults who are standing firm in their faith, leading others, and building families focused on Christ. Few things are more encouraging to mentors than to see those they have invested in growing in their faith.

Paul had not led these Christians to faith, but he had been praying for them. He had been concerned for them. And seeing them living out their faith would bring him great joy—and give him encouragement to keep pouring into others.

This is also a reminder that we need one another. God has designed us to mutually encourage each other. Paul understood this, and hoped to visit the Romans, knowing it would benefit them but also himself. Paul understood that we need the Church and the Church needs us.

**His third desire was to minister alongside them.** Paul's heart was to see people come to know Jesus, because he knew how drastically it can change your life. I don't think Paul was under any illusion that the Roman church needed him to come to them, but he said that just as he had a love for the Roman Christians, he also had a love for those who were still lost among them. Paul said he wasn't concerned about whether people were Greeks or barbarians (a term which simply described people who didn't speak Greek), he wasn't concerned about their education level or their social status. What he was concerned with was whether people knew Jesus. That was the heart that drove Paul to serve. He longed to join them in ministering to their friends and neighbors. Paul wanted to join in their work.

One of the striking things in this passage, however, is that Paul says he had planned many times to make such a trip but had been repeatedly prevented from doing so. This is a somewhat surprising statement, yet Paul does not seem upset by it. I think this shows the difference prayer makes, and the difference faith makes. We know from elsewhere in scripture that Paul desired to travel to Rome, minister among them, and then ultimately travel to Spain and minister there. For whatever reason, the Lord prevented that from happening for quite some time. When Paul finally did get to go to Rome, it was as a prisoner. And yet, even then, God used Paul to make an impact, as we are told the gospel spread among the entire Praetorian guard!

Sometimes we pray for things that aren't selfish, that seem like good and godly things, and yet, God seems not to answer our prayers. That was Paul's experience as well, but he seemed to understand God knows what He is doing. If you find yourself waiting on the Lord, let me remind you that there are many possible reasons for the delay.

- He may be setting things up for your prayer to be answered, but they aren't ready yet. So He says to wait.
- He may be answering your prayer through means other than what you expect. Sometimes we imagine that the only way God can answer our prayers is through us—but He may use others to accomplish His purposes.
- He may have something better for us than what we can envision. Sometimes we pray for things, but what God has is better so He tells us no, knowing that if we will just hold on, we'll see the blessings He has planned for us.
- He may have other things for us to do. Sometimes we get focused on one thing, while God has another thing for us to do. He may not answer our prayer now because that will keep us from what we are supposed to be doing now.

The point is that just because prayer doesn't immediately give us the results we desire does not mean that we should throw up our hands in despair. Paul desperately longed to visit the Romans. He seemed to have genuine and good motivations for wanting to visit, yet he had also come to understand that the Lord was telling him the time wasn't right. Rather than despairing or becoming discouraged, Paul chose to trust that God must have a reason, and to keep praying until it was time for him to go.

## Conclusion

These verses give us a glimpse into Paul's heart. We see what drives him and gives him energy. We should examine our own hearts and see what drives us. We would be well served to model our hearts after his. Here's some ideas of where to start.

**We should be driven by love for God rather than competition.** Paul was excited to see the gospel spread. It didn't matter to him whether he got credit or someone else did. So often, we find ourselves in competition with other believers for our area of influence. This happens between churches and within churches. We should be less concerned by who is in charge, whether we get our way, or who gets the credit for things. Instead, we should make our primary focus whether God is honored. If He is, the other stuff doesn't matter.

**We should be people of prayer.** I love the counsel James give us on prayer,  
<sup>13</sup> Are any of you suffering hardships? You should pray. Are any of you happy? You should sing praises. <sup>14</sup> Are any of you sick? You should call for the elders of the church to come and pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord. (James 5:13-14, NLT)

Whatever your particular situation is, the right response is always prayer! This is a struggle for so many Christians. I believe it is because Satan knows the power available to us and will do whatever he can to stop us from accessing it! The greatest gift we can give to others is faithful prayer, and our greatest asset is found in spending time with the Lord. Paul understood this, and we should too. We should fight to develop time that we can spend in conversation with the Lord.

**We should be led by faith.** To Paul, faith was not an auxiliary aspect of his life. It was the driving force behind everything. This is supposed to be the pattern of Christians. Our faith should guide our decisions and our actions. It should give us confidence to wait upon the Lord when our plans are frustrated. And it should give us a desire to see the gospel message spread to everyone. When faith is the center of our lives, it shows on the outside. Others will take notice, and hopefully turn to the Lord.

As we continue our study of Romans, we'll come to understand the gospel message at a deeper level. We will marvel at Paul's mind. But as we begin, we must remember that what drove Paul was his heart. We'd do well to pattern our hearts after his.

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