

The Unique Encouragement of Gospel Presence

Romans 1:8-15

Intro: The Pain of Lack of Presence

We've all experienced various measures of difficulty this past year or so, but my guess is a common one for many people has simply been the lack of personal interaction with those whom they love. Some of us have not been able to be around people much. Worse, we've not been around God's people. Even worse, we've not been around those in our local church family.

It's been so difficult not to be in the presence of many members of this church. There is something unique and irreplaceable about being in the same room with fellow church members. There's something irreplaceable about giving them a hug, looking them in the eyes, telling them you love them. You can't replace that experience over email, over the phone, over livestream, over zoom. It has been hard because we were meant to long to be WITH each other.

In this passage, Paul prays that he might be WITH the church in Rome because he longs to see them in person so that he can encourage them in the gospel. He

expresses his desire through 1) A Grateful Prayer, 2) A Personal Longing, and 3) An Eager Obligation.

We're gonna unpack what each of those are, but my prayer is that Paul's prayer becomes our prayer...that his longing becomes our longing...and that his obligation becomes our obligation. So let's begin with...

A Grateful Prayer

Paul is thankful. Why? **[v8]**

He's thankful for THEIR faith, and he's thankful that THEIR faith is *spreading*. Why? Well, as we saw last time, God is the one who effectually called them to believe! He's thanking GOD for THEIR faith because God was the one who called them to himself!

But notice, his thanksgiving is expressed in the form of a prayer. How do they know Paul is thankful for them?

[vv9-10, "For/Because"]

So how can they know he's thankful for their faith?

"BECAUSE, God knows, I pray for you without ceasing."

His constant prayers for them are a reflection of his gratefulness of their faith. How is that the case? What's the connection between his gratefulness for their faith

and his constant praying for them? I think the answer is found in WHAT he prays for. Did you see it? **[v10]**

He's praying that he might see them in person. That's how we can know he's thankful for their faith... because he prays regularly that he can be with them. Ok...let's keep unpacking this: How do his prayers to be with them reveal that he's thankful for their faith? What does gratefulness for their faith have to do with his praying to BE with them?

Let me give you a hint: There is something irreplaceable about BEING with other believers. There is something unique about BEING with them that brings you much joy because you can see their faith up close and personal. And this actually leads to the next point...

A Personal Longing

So Paul just expressed gratefulness for their FAITH, and demonstrates such gratefulness because he keeps asking God to BE with them. So we're asking: What's the connection between his gratefulness for their faith and his desire to be with them? **[v11]**

So there's his longing, and I'm calling it a PERSONAL longing, because he wants to BE WITH them. He wants to

SEE them! He wants to visit them IN PERSON! Apparently, letter-writing is not sufficient! There is something unique about in-person interpersonal relating to one another that cannot be replaced. WHY? What is so unique about being WITH other believers? Notice what he says: **[v11, “impart to you some spiritual gift”]**

What’s that? He wants to be WITH them to impart a spiritual gift to strengthen them. Apparently, he needed to be WITH them to do this. Writing a letter was insufficient. He had to be there in person to impart this spiritual gift. What is it?

Some think it’s one of the miraculous gifts, like speaking in tongues or prophesying. Others think it’s some sort of mystical blessing he might bestow on them to become gifted in a certain area so they can use that gift for the upbuilding of the church—like, he’s gonna gift some of them with the gift of teaching or service or generosity or exhortation. But that doesn’t make much sense because *people* never impart those gifts to other *people*. According to Scripture, those always come *from God*.

So what is this spiritual gift he has in mind? I think we find answer in the next verse. **[v12]**

That's the spiritual gift—to be encouraged in each other's faith! Faith in what? Faith in the gospel! That's why he wants to BE WITH them. To encourage them with his faith in Christ and they encourage him with their faith in Christ.

And that's the connection between his gratefulness for their faith and his prayer to be with them. He's thankful for their faith...how do we know? Because he longs to be with them! How does that demonstrate a thankfulness for their faith? Because *being with them* allows him to be encouraged by their faith.

Now, you might say, “Why does he need to be in their PRESENCE to be encouraged by their faith? Why do WE have to be physically in the presence of other believers to give and receive this spiritual gift of mutual strengthening of faith?”

We live in a day where, with just the click of a button, we can be in instant communication with someone who lives across town, or even across the world. And there's A LOT of faith strengthening and faith encouragement that takes place over text or email or phone or video chat.

I just recently had a phone convo with a missionary we support who lives in the middle east. And every time I get off the phone with him, I'm encouraged. And I make it my goal to encourage him every time we talk.

So, it definitely can happen WITHOUT being IN PERSON. BUT don't forget, Paul is seeking to strengthen this church in Rome through a letter, and this letter MOST CERTAINLY would've strengthen them in their faith... YET he still feels the need to SEE them in person.

There's something unique about being WITH other believers, and there is something WOEFULLY insufficient about communicating through other means. We're thankful for these other means of communication, but they are not enough.

You cannot replace in-person edification with Zoom or livestream or phone calls or texts. Of course ,these things are not bad, but they're not enough. If we rely upon NON-IN-PERSON means of fellowship to accomplish what we're called to accomplish in church life—namely strengthening each other's faith through the gospel—we are falling short.

This is why it is so difficult for our homebound members. Those who LONG to be here, but they simply cannot. They feel the insufficiency of zoom and phone and livestream and email and text. Of course, they're thankful for at least these things, but they know they're not enough.

(That's why I wanna encourage those of us who still have good health...those of us who are to get out and about to schedule visits with our homebound members. Maybe a socially distanced porch visit.)

We are meant to be WITH each other. And frankly, Bill and I, as your pastors, feel concern for some who *might* (we don't know for certain because we don't know hearts!), but it's possible some *might* not FEEL the level of importance it is to be in each other's lives at this church...to *physically* gather with the church. It's massively important. And when we don't feel how important it is, that is a spiritual defect.

So if you're in that boat...maybe you've gotten comfortable with the livestream, maybe you don't feel the urgency to do whatever you need to do to get back into the life of the church, I'm pleading with you to pray that God would help you feel that urgency. If you don't

feel the immeasurable loss of not physically being with your church family...listen, that does not reveal the lack of importance of being with your church family. That reveals something is lacking in your heart.

Pray! Pray that you will feel it. That you LONG to be with the other members of KACF whom you've covenanted with. *Through this past year, I spoke with many members who were out because of Covid and the necessity for them to take extra precautions because of their health or because they're taking care of someone with poor health or whatever.*

But it was refreshing to talk to many of our members on the phone and hear about their longing to be back, even aching as they wait. And because of that, they were not complacent, content, settled with, "You know, this is just how it is. Covid has been an unprecedented event, so we'll just see what happens." And therefore, they were actively thinking through what they needed to do to be back.

Can I address you who are watching on livestream? When I say we want you back, I really mean it. I'm not blowing smoke; I'm speaking genuinely. We want you back. We miss you. We miss being encouraged by your evident

faith. We miss encouraging you in your faith. Pray, plead with God, that you might be able to be back REALLY SOON.

Paul longs to be with them IN PERSON, to strengthen their faith in the gospel and to be strengthen in his faith in the gospel...because there is something irreplaceable about being together. Finally, Paul expresses...

An Eager Obligation

He offered a grateful prayer for their faith, expressed his personal longing to be with them, and now he reveals his eager obligation to preach the gospel in Rome. **[v13]**

Did you catch the two groups? He wants to “reap harvest” (meaning, do something that will produce fruit) and he wants to do it among 1) the church in Rome AND 2) among the rest of the Gentiles. Who’s that? He’s talking about non-Christians. He wants to come to Rome to reap harvest among Christians and non-Christians. Why? **[v14]**

The reason he wants to reap harvest among Christians and non-Christians is because he’s obligated to this. A woodenly literally translation would be: “I am a debtor”

to them. How can this be? He's never met them, so how can he be in debt to them?

There are two ways we can be indebted to someone else. One is that we owe someone for something THEY lent us. *If you lend me \$100, then that means I'm indebted to you in the sense that I owe you \$100.*

Is that what Paul has in mind here? Did the church at Rome and the rest of the Gentiles lend him something for which he is obligated to pay back? That doesn't make sense; he's never even met them.

There's another sense in which we can be indebted to another. We could be given something by someone else that is meant to be passed along to another. *So, if you gave me \$100, not for me, but for me to give to someone else, then I would be indebted to that person whom the money is for.*

Is that what Paul has in mind? WHAT was Paul given that was meant to be passed along to the church in Rome and to the rest of the Gentiles? And WHO entrusted Paul with such a gift? What's the gift and who gave it him to give to the Gentiles? He already said it in **[1:4b-6]**.

Paul was entrusted with the gospel, to preach it to all the Gentiles, including those who are in Rome. That's how he's indebted to them. He owes them this. He is obligated to pass along this gift of the gospel. WHY? Because Jesus entrusted it to him to pass it along!

...TO WHOM? To whom does Paul owe the gospel. Did you hear how he put it in **[v14, "Greeks and barbarians"]**?

Who's that? Notice the parallel: "Greeks" corresponds to "wise" and "Barbarians" corresponds to "foolish." Who are these groups? Greeks were Greek-speaking Gentiles. And therefore, if they're Gentiles who are Greek-speaking, it means they've adopted the culture of the Greco-Roman world, which was a high class society.

Barbarians, on the other hand, were less-cultured according to Greek society. They didn't receive the same education and didn't have the same social standards as the Greek-speaking Gentiles. In fact, the word "barbarian" was coined by Greek-speakers because the way they talked sounds like, "Bar, bar, bar." They were viewed as primitive, even lesser-than, because they weren't as cultured as themselves.

And Paul says, “I’m indebted to both! I don’t care if you’re rich or poor. I don’t care if you’re educated or uneducated. I don’t care what class of society you’re in! I’m indebted to preach the gospel to you!” This is radical talk.

We don’t size up people before we share Jesus with them to see if we think they would be “useful” for the church or not. We preach the gospel to all! We have been entrusted with the best gift for the world. We owe it to them because Jesus gave it to us, not just to keep it for ourselves, but to pass it along!

Think of what kind of a horrible person would be given a large sum of money that was meant to be taken to the poor and needy, but that person just keeps it for himself?

And yet, we’ve been given the greatest gift that’s meant to be shared, and many of us just keep it for ourselves! Oh that we might FEEL the obligation to share the gospel. Oh that we might FEEL the fact that we are indebted to the people around us to tell them about Christ. Listen, we owe others the gospel.

You owe it to your unbelieving family member. You owe it to your unbelieving neighbor. You owe it to your

unbelieving coworker. You owe it to them to pass along to them the greatest gift they could possibly receive, which is, the gospel of Jesus Christ. [Gospel]

I owe that to you, if you're here and you're not yet a Christian. I am under obligation to share it with you. [Appeal]

Now, what kind of obligation/indebtedness does Paul have in mind? What do you think of when you hear the word "obligation"? Usually it's: "I'm doing it because I have to. I don't really want to. But I'm doing it because there will be a consequence if we don't." *Like, paying taxes. I doubt any of us are whistling and skipping to our accountant's office when April 15 rolls around. No, we're usually dreading it. We do it because we have to... because if we don't, the IRS is gonna get us. And so the obligation is there because the potential negative outcome.*

Is that what Paul has in mind? "I'm under obligation to preach the gospel," meaning, "I'm not happy to do it. I'm doing it out of duty." I doubt that's what he means, based on what he says in [v15].

Notice the parallel: v14—“I am under obligation.”
V15—“I am eager.” In Paul’s mind, there’s no difference between the two! His obligation is an eager one. And his eagerness is obligatory. The two must go hand-in-hand when it comes to preaching the gospel.

Do you feel that? Do you have an eager obligation to proclaim the gospel to others? Pray that you would! Pray for that kind of heart! “I’m OBLIGATED do this because God calls me to it, but I’m also EAGER to do it!”

But listen, what is so striking is that Paul is not talking about proclaiming the gospel ONLY to those who have yet to embrace it. It is true: he is under obligation to proclaim it to unbelievers: Greek and Barbarian alike. But did you catch what he said in **[v15, “to you”]**

Who’s that? It’s the CHURCH in Rome. Christians! Wait a minute? Why does he need to preach the gospel to them? They’re already believers! They already know the gospel. They’ve already heard it. “Why waste your breath, Paul? Give them something more, something new, something fresh. Why are you eager to preach the gospel to Christians who already know and believe it?”

If you have been at this church long enough, you know the answer to that question. Christians NEVER move on from the gospel! We keep coming back to it again and again as we grow in deeper and deeper understanding of it...BECAUSE, so often, we live as IF we HAVE forgotten it! So we need to be reminded of it.

- o When you're tempted to ***despair about your sin***, "I did it again. I'm such a screw-up!", remember the gospel in Rom. 8:1, "There is therefore now NO condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!"
- o When you're tempted to ***believe that God is constantly angry*** with you because you keep messing up, you remember the gospel in Rom. 5:1, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, WE HAVE PEACE WITH GOD."
- o OR when you're tempted to ***treat your sin lightly*** and say, "it's not that big of a deal just this once..." you remember the gospel in Rom. 6:1, "How can we who have died to sin still live in it?"
- o When you're tempted ***feel self-righteous*** and think you're better than others, you remember the gospel Rom. 3:27, "...what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded...for we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law."

We NEVER move on from the gospel. That's why Paul is eager to preach the gospel to the CHRISTIANS in Rome. And that's why we should be eager to do the same. Talk about Christ to one another. Don't be afraid of reminding your fellow church members of the basic truths of the gospel.

The gospel is what builds up the church. And this is a church that is centered upon the gospel and part of what that means is we're gonna talk about it a lot.

Conclusion

Are you thankful for the faith of others in this church? Do you long to encourage one another in each other's faith? Do you feel an eager obligation to build up one another in the gospel? May Paul's prayer be our prayer and his longing be our longing and his obligation be our obligation.