

## *“Where Power Lies”*

*Isaiah 42:1-9; Romans 1:16-17*

January 12, 2020

My first memory of being in awe of power comes from a young age. I was around 6 or so. Back then and even now, I love pickles. Specifically, Mt. Olive pickles. AS you likely know, then as now, Mt. Olive pickles come in glass jars with metal lids. Lids which are often quite difficult to remove at first. Well, if they're hard for us as adults, imagine how difficult they'd be to a six-year-old child. Even one as hungry as I was that day and desirous of one, that lid? I couldn't budge it. Not a millimeter.

But I knew what to do.

“Dad!” I called out.

Rather quickly, he arrived and, with what seemed to be to be the strength of Samson, easily removed the lid. Rather quickly I was munching away on one of my favorite snacks. I knew, right then and there, I wanted to have that kind of power.

Now, it isn't surprising that I'd mistake physical strength for power at the time. I was, after all, only 6, puny and small in the world

Of course, as I grew up, I realized while physical strength was nice, there were other more potent sources of power...or so I thought. Y'all, I spent seasons of my life believing power meant having money or using the right words or wielding influence or a host of other things. Over time though, life demonstrated to me the folly of those beliefs, sometimes with quite a significant amount of fall-out.

Thankfully though, there is power in this world and, even better, we have access to it.

I open this morning with a brief reading from Paul's letter to the Church at Rome, the first chapter, I'll read verses 16 & 17. Hear now the Word of our Lord:

“For I am not ashamed of the power of the Gospel, it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it, the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

The Apostle Paul writes this letter to a church that he'd yet to meet in person. He'd heard stories about them, of course, about their faithfulness in the midst of a culture growing deeply suspicious of their beliefs. But, as of the writing of this letters, he'd not been there yet.

So, this letter is written as a means of introduction. A way of saying, when I get there, here's what I'll want to talk about, where I'll be coming from.

It helps, doesn't it?

To know ahead of time what's going to be discussed, that is. Want to get a pastor quaking in their boots? Call them out of the blue and tell them you've got something you need to talk to them about. Then, don't tell them the topic.

It makes us anxious, I confess it. Chances are none of us like to be told there's something important we need to be told only to have to wait.

My guess it was just like that way back when the first Apostles still walked the earth.

So, after 15 verses of Salutations and Prayers, Paul arrives at the gist of the matter. Here, he declares, is why I write. Here, he states, is what he'll want to talk about.

And while I am certainly not Paul, I've grown to understand a little bit more this week about his feelings and the significance of FIRST WORDS as he writes to Rome. Like Paul, I've heard a whole lot about y'all. Good things, I assure you. It seems as though the Pastor Nominating Committee did an excellent job of sharing with me the nature of this church and her members. For that, I am most grateful.

But neither, I realize, do you know me. Not as I hope you will over time, I hope. You know some things about me perhaps, things that can be written on a piece of paper or maybe a thing or two that's been shared about me by others. Hopefully good things, I trust.

But no matter what you've heard about me or read about me, I want you to know something, from my lips to your ears.

Like Paul, I am not ashamed of the Gospel.

Now, years ago perhaps, there was a common understanding of just what that meant. Nowadays though? Not so much. There are as many beliefs concerning the Gospel as there are stars in the skies, seems like. So what is it. Not what's my opinion of it, mind you. But what does the Bible teach us that it is?

Well, quite literally, the ancient Greek translates as, "good news." But I've come to discover that the mere words "good news" does not begin to do the depth and richness of the word meaning.

You know what?

The more and more I read of Romans the more I believe I'm convinced that defining the Gospel is exactly what Paul unfolds for us as we read the remaining chapters of this letter. And he does so, I believe for a reason. As a lot of his letters are going to hint at, there were other, false versions of this Gospel floating around out there, just as there are today. And, as Paul would learn throughout the days of his life, as history has proven to us through the 2000 years since Christ rose from the grave, these other attempts to declare Good News, may have been fleetingly nice, but there really isn't much power in them.

Let me see if I can put that another way. As you'll likely learn if you haven't already, I used to be a chef. Worked in some nice restaurants along the way. Without question, the best I ever worked at was a place over in Charlotte called "The LampLighter."

It was about 1997 or so and I was working as a line cook at the LampLighter. While most of what we did was a la carte dining, we also did a lot of banquets, especially in the latter days of any particular year.

One day during that season, we received last-minute instructions for a banquet of 75 that was to take place that very night. Whatever person booked the menu for the party wrongly included Chocolate Mousse as the dessert. What that person didn't realize was that 75 servings of this sublime sweet would take one prep cook nearly an entire day to prepare. Maybe not Sandy, but for us lug head line cooks it would've.

Chocolate Mousse, when it's done well, is just one of those desserts every chocolate lover should have at least one time in their life. With a well-executed mousse, the experience is revelatory. First, deep notes of chocolate dance upon your palette. It's almost too much, honestly, but the intensity is then muted by the creamy, ethereally light texture. Then, finally, the mousse finishes creamily, pairing with the chocolate to make every luxurious bite delicious.

But I still had no idea how we'd do it with only hours to go before service.

My Sous Chef did though. He stuffed a \$20 bill in my palm. "Run up the street to the Harris-Teeter and grab about a dozen boxes of Jell-O chocolate pudding." He underscored the brand as I walked out the kitchen door. "Make sure it's Jell-O, not the store brand."

When I returned, Mike told me to grab a blender, some heavy cream and to melt about a half pound of butter. He then orally called out the steps required to make what he began calling "blender mousse." I added the packs of pudding mix, heavy cream and the melted butter. Then, Mike told me, "turn it on."

I did so and watched the concoction froth a bit and then solidify. Voila, blender mousse.

"I hate having to do this but we've got no choice," the Chef suggested. I was terrified that the restaurants' reputation would be destroyed.

Turns out, people LOVED it. Well, at least the first bite they did. I mean, it's hard to go wrong with chocolate, right. But, after a few mouthfuls, a discerning palette would've identified that it was cloyingly sweet and heavy as an unleavened biscuit. It certainly didn't leave you changed by eating it.

My sense is that a great deal of what passes for "gospel" these days is just like that blender mousse. Pleasant for a second, but easily forgotten, lacking the real depth and delight of the real McCoy.

Friends, make no mistake about it, there are lots of pleasant things said about Jesus, lots of nice, well-meaning folks out there today talking about Him or God and they all strike as nice. But are they the Gospel? Not often, I'm afraid.

So, just like Paul many, many years ago prior to meeting the people of the Church at Rome spent 15 chapters describing, here is what is presented as the Gospel in brief, don't make worship go beyond 11am kind of fashion.

The Good News began, according to Scripture, prior to creation. Hear these words of Ephesians 1:3-5

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we

should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.”

Which means, dear friends to be, that before light was separated from dark or the dry lands emerged from the seas, Jesus called your name and said, this one is mine.

*And, since God is omnipotent, he would've known a thing or two about how you'd handle this thing called life even before he did it.*

Y'all, I'll never forget this time right before Easter when there was only Ben and we went into the Toys 'r Us with him. He must've been like 2 or so. And right there in front of the checkout was a huge Thomas the Train display. Ben tottered over to it and made an instantaneous love connection with a little steam engine by the name of Toby.

How do I remember the name, you might wonder?

Well, when Natalie got done checking out it was time to go. I told Ben. He didn't budge, holding that little Toby in his hands. I picked him up. “To-beeee” he wailed as though in some sort of Sophoclean tragedy. He began kicking and screaming. Y'all he wailed at darn near the top of his lungs all the way back to Mount Holly from Gastonia. No easy feat, I might add.

Now look, if Dr. Emmet Brown had screeched into that parking lot in a Flux-capacitored DeLorean time machine and told me, “Warning, danger ahead. Don't. Go. In. There” prior to going in, I would've listened and never one experienced that Toys 'R Us.

Thank God, Jesus isn't like us. That's good news, I assure you.

Jesus would've known all the pain and frustration and aggravation we humans were going to cause Him right from the moment Adam and Eve ate from the one taboo tree in the Garden of Eden right down to every single transgression you and I would ever commit. Knowing it all, he said, YES.

Yes to being our Lord.

Yes to being our savior.

Because that's what Paul tells us real power consists of, God's ability to save us. The Gospel, the good news declares that God, in his infinite power and wisdom chose to save us from ourselves. John 3:16, right? “For God so loved the world that he gave us his only Son.”

And it isn't just that God gave us His son who was willing to lay down his life for us and for our salvation.

John's Gospel records that when John the Baptist met Jesus, he declared, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

1 John 2:2 puts it this way– “He [Jesus] is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”

That's good news. Well, to sinners at least...whoever they may be.

You see, that's the problem. That's the reason why those other quote-unquote Gospels are much akin to the blender mousse, lacking the mind-blowing qualities of the real thing. They too often leave out the most obvious elephant in any room you'll ever go in with people in it.

See, it's the people that are sinners. In a whole lot of ways, we've grown to detest that word. It's okay, God isn't a very big fan of sin, either. But just because we don't like a thing, there's only so long you can avoid the obvious.

And unless you've a stranded alien from some other planet, guess you, you is people. I am people. I am a sinner and you are too.

Everyone is, really. We're all just bozos on the same darn bus. Paul puts it more eloquently than that – Romans 3:23 – “For all have sinned and fall short of the Glory of God.”

You know when I feel that truth most acutely?

Coming off the highway from I-85 into the city of Mount Holly there's a place. You may know it. And so I'll have in my mind that I'm heading home to eat a salad or a lean cuisine meal and be determined that's what I'm going to do. But then those yellow neon arches start to rise high into the sky and something like an angelic chorus starts singing in the caverns of my mind – “Two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce cheese....” I think you know the rest.

And even though I know it's not the right thing to do, I do it anyway.

If it were only Big Macs that did me in like that. But it's not. Not for me, not for you, is it?

As he unfolds the good news, the true Gospel which is revealed in Jesus Christ, he says something similar in Romans 7. That he often does that which he knows is wrong and frequently does not do the thing he knows is right. How true is that.

Well, that's sin friends and it's as real as the wood in this pulpit or the ground underneath your feet. And while people have always tried to work their way around sin with all sorts of feats of the mind, there it is nevertheless. Or, as my wife says to me quite frequently – "Jason, just because you think something is right, doesn't always mean that it is."

Sin is awful stuff, y'all. And while the world around us may try to sacralize it, it's still not where you want to be but where you are often nevertheless.

Sin is death. the New Testament is quite clear about that and the testimony of the ages proves it true.

So, its Good News someone has done something about it, right?

Of course it is.

And OH, did God in His almighty power do something about sin, death too, by the way.

Philippians 2 – Jesus "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

Now look y'all, I look at a 32" waited- pair of skinny jeans and I can't imagine squeezing into them yet here is God in Christ cramming himself into human flesh. One moment he's zipping round the universe and beyond doing what he wants and the next, well, he's a helpless innocent babe born in a manger with more animal witnesses than humans.

Now that's some power.

And if that wasn't miraculous enough, what he did next is even more amazing.

An innocent man accepted a guilty verdict and humbly, willingly, walked himself to a lonely cross on the edge of a landfill and allowed himself to be nailed onto wood.

Not for anything he'd done wrong, mind you. But for what I've done and will do wrong. For what you've done and will do wrong. All of it. God chose to suffer and die for us to relieve us from bondage to sin and death.

But it gets even better, this good news, this gospel.

If we will but believe it true, it is and we are assured life after our deaths in a place Revelation tells us. "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

And it really is this easy. Paul tells us in chapter 10 – "For if you believe in your hearts and confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord, YOU WILL BE SAVED."

If we believe that Jesus really had died for our sins, really has gone to prepare a place for us in the eternal Kingdom to come, then it is so.

And because we know that we're safe and saved, our lives fill with such joy that we're able to wield the Power of God. How, you might ask? By declaring the Gospel to others. It makes the impossible, possible my friends.

A few years back I needed to get a congregant's car out of impound and I went to a garage over in York, SC to do so. There, I met the owner. We got to chatting. He's a Christian and, as it happens with us, we got to talking about Jesus. Here's what he shared with me.

He told me that when he was just a young man, another man had shot his Dad dead over a dice game they were playing. That man, he got caught and was sentenced to prison. But just because justice has been served, doesn't mean the wounds heal, does it?

Well, not for this owner they hadn't, he shared. The man told me he spent years ANGRY. Not being able to take it out on the man who killed his Dad, he said he took it out on everyone around him. His kids, his wife, himself.

Then, one day, he got invited to a Men's Bible study they hold at the Rock Hill Cracker Barrel of Tuesdays, think they still do it. Listening to Romans 2, this man told me he knew that God forgave him. It was like chains lifted off him, he said.

But that wasn't all. The man told me he realized that if God could forgive him, he could forgive that man who shot his daddy dead. But it wasn't just words. He wrote letters to the state, participated in a parole hearing for the shooter. His forgiveness helped that man be freed.

That's power. The ability to do what no human power can do. That's the Gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation.

Because you see, power isn't found in human strength nor is it found in money or influence or any other place you might look. That man, my Dad who showed me the power of physical strength back when I was a kind, he's a frail man now. Money, well, it comes and goes to, doesn't it? Here today, gone tomorrow that's what they say and whoever "They" are, they're absolutely right on that account. Fame as a form of power is perhaps the most fleeting of all in today's culture. You can go from viral hero to Twitter zero in the time it takes a batch of cookies to bake in the oven. But, then again, we should know that anything human is ephemeral, at best. "The grass withers, the flowers fades."

Power though? Real power? It's eternal.

And it's disclosed to us in the Gospel.

Jesus Christ took flesh, lived and died for us all and, one day, he's coming back to take us to a place where lions lay down with lambs and toddlers twiddle with adders. And when we've been there 10,000 years, bright shining as the sun. We'll have no less days to sing God's praise than when we'd first begun.

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

Amen.

### **Intro – Where Power Lies**

Romans 1:16-17 – ““For I am not ashamed of the power of the Gospel, it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it, the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”

### **Before the Foundations of the Earth**

Ephesians 1:3-5 - “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.”

### **Sin**

John 1:29 – ““Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

1 John 2:2 – “He [Jesus] is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”

Romans 3:23 – “For all have sinned and fall short of the Glory of God

### **Incarnation**

Philippians 2:6-8 – “Jesus “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

### **Kingdom of God**

Revelation 21:1-4 – “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

### **Ease of Salvation**

Romans 10:9 – “because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

### **Power to Forgive**

Ephesians 4:32 – “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”