

# Free From Slavery

Message 1

## *The Power of God*

Romans 1:16-17 (Read 1:8-17)

### *Introduction*

On August 6, 1945, the world awoke to the most awesome power it had ever seen. One small bomb fell on Hiroshima and instantly reduced one of the world's mightiest industrial cities to rubble. It only took one bomb, but that bomb unleashed the energy of the atom, and the world has never been the same. Since then warfare, politics, and business alike have been conducted in the shadow of atomic power. The question presently before the nations of the world is who shall be allowed to possess such power, and war against Iraq is imminent for this reason. In such a war other marvels will be displayed. The military might of the U.S. armed forces is truly amazing, and, for better or worse, all nations stand in awe of our power.

Two thousand years ago the whole earth trembled at the power of Rome. Her legions were virtually invincible, and every scrap of civilized earth this side of India was under her rule. Roman rule was fair – by ancient standards at least – but brutal, and many had sought to get free of her power. Most would-be rebels ended up on crosses strung out over the countryside – a warning to all to fear Rome above everything. To Rome, Jesus was just another insignificant provocateur, and no one thought twice about his death. But to a small, but growing sect within the empire, Jesus's death heralded a new age – an era of light, life, and freedom. They were so convinced of this, and so energized by Jesus' message, wherever they went they spread this message to anyone who would listen – and the sect kept growing. Even in Rome itself there were those who began to follow The Way, as the sect was called. They believed Jesus' message and began to live by His commands.

Paul was one of those followers of Jesus. He was a brilliant, well-educated, devout, and zealous Jew who was also a Roman citizen. He had a clear knowledge of Roman law and in his travels he had experienced first-hand the pervasive power of Rome. Paul knew no one could withstand the might of Rome, yet he seems never to notice it. In fact Paul was eager to go right into the center of Roman power and preach the gospel of Jesus. Until now he had been prevented by demands elsewhere. But now Paul's work in Greece and Asia Minor is wrapping up and he is planning to move on to Spain and preach. On his way he plans to stop over in Rome and minister to the believers there. He makes clear in verses 13 to 15 that he is not in any way intimidated by the great city, and is eager to arrive. And in verse 16 he emphatically states that he is not ashamed of his message.

### *Ashamed of the Gospel*

How about you? Are you ashamed of the gospel of Christ? Why should you be? Isn't that the wonderful message of God's love, the message which led you out of sin and into a life of service to God? Look around you. Families are breaking up, children are falling to sex and drugs, corporate executives are going to jail – our society is a wreck. Your friends and neighbors struggle to achieve the American dream, but never quite reach it. Life is a huge disappointment – or worse – punctuated by brief flashes of happiness. Now, Christians have all the same struggles as everyone else – but God has intervened in our lives. Some of you can look back on your own history and see these sin patterns, and perhaps you still struggle with these temptations. But God convinced you that His Son died for you. He accepted you as His son and promises you a place in His Kingdom. Your life has meaning and purpose. Sin no longer defines you, but is a temporary lapse from a life of joyful service to God. What a blessing! What could be greater than to be welcomed, protected, and cherished by God? So no, you aren't ashamed of the gospel, are you?

But in fact, we are all at times ashamed of the gospel. When you stop to think of it, it's rather silly, isn't it? Mere words...why would we give so much credit to mere words? Words don't have any power. As children we learned to say, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Once we were captivated by the gospel of Christ, but then we got over it. The excitement, the glow wore off. We came back to our senses and now live normally. We revert to getting through life by the power of sticks and stones – or guns and greenbacks – and avoid appearing too attached to the gospel.

Furthermore, the message itself is a bit ridiculous. True, Jesus was a great teacher and miracle-worker, but look what happened to Him! He raised others from the dead, but He couldn't escape death Himself. Sure, a key part of the gospel is His resurrection from the dead, but no one actually saw it happen, and only a few saw Him after He returned to life. And *no* reputable authority saw Him alive after He died. You know, He really *looks* like a failure. Now if He had attacked Rome and wiped out her legions – *then* we would have something to brag about! But as it is, we're not so sure. The gospel makes a great story, and we hope it's true – but you can't deny that to any outsider it sounds embarrassingly improbable.

What's more, the whole thing is so *ordinary*. Jesus was, frankly, a nobody, and His followers were the same. None of the nobles or officers followed Him, just thousands of rabble. And He Himself was so homely. Honestly, there was nothing at all appealing about Him. And His message – while it makes grand claims and offers lofty promises, it requires a boring life. Followers of Jesus are supposed to love each other and their enemies, work ordinary jobs, and live at peace with everyone. There is nothing really appealing to such a life – especially not to sophisticated Romans.

Really, we are ashamed of the gospel because it makes us look ridiculous. We live among people who don't believe it – people who live by the power of the sword and money – people who expect real, tangible results, not fantastic promises – people who want a rich, exciting life. We live in a world of science and power, knowledge and accomplishment. We move among people who are athletes, scholars, billionaires, military commanders. We live in the greatest, richest, most powerful country in the world, and what does Jesus have to offer? A wild story about death and resurrection, a life of kindness to others! Are you kidding? How does this compete with the Super Bowl? How is this more important than defeating terrorism? How is this more powerful than nuclear weapons? How is this more exciting than developing digital communications and the billions of dollars waiting to be made there?

Admit it, you don't really boast to your friends that you spent 15 minutes before lunch conferring with God at noon prayer, do you? Did you eagerly round up everyone you know to come here tonight to meet Jesus? When your classmates announce that they are going to Washington to meet congressmen, do you reply that you went to heaven to meet the angels Sunday morning? And why not? Because by comparison your activities seem so weak, so trivial, so foolish.

Paul lived in a society just like ours in its essentials. The gospel was the same then as it is now. Yet Paul was not ashamed of the gospel. Why not? What made Paul different from us?

### ***The Power of God***

Paul had many reasons not to be ashamed of the gospel. For one thing, it is inherently reasonable. His friends, and ours, do not immediately see this. To them the gospel sounds foolish. A story about salvation by a man who died and rose seems too hard to believe. But when you take the time to think about it – to think about the universe, life, and the meaning of it all – the gospel is really the *only* thing that makes sense. So Paul had reason to be proud of the gospel because it is the best philosophy in the world. But that is not why he was unashamed.

Paul could also have mentioned that the gospel is inherently beautiful. This would appeal to the more aesthetically oriented in his crowd. It's a message of love conveyed in the most beautiful literature ever produced. The life of Jesus, the parables, the ethics, the songs are unmatched as works of art. But Paul neglected the aesthetic superiority of the gospel. For the practically minded Paul might have appealed to the effectiveness of the gospel. Psychology fails to solve problems of self-image and relationships, but the teachings of Jesus produce working families and stable societies. The more you study Jesus' teachings, you see how profoundly they grapple with human nature and the condition of man. Scripture is uncanny in its ability to solve social and psychological problems – but Paul passes over this virtue.

Paul zeroes right in to the central aspect of the gospel. To those dwelling in the most powerful city in the world, Paul declares that the true supreme power is found in the gospel. Not in the Roman legions, not in Greek philosophy, not in Jewish ethics – but in the gospel. This is an invincible, unstoppable power. Other powers can change the landscape or the political situation, but they can't even touch human destiny. The gospel absolutely changes the future of those who believe it – and this is the greatest power of all.

The gospel is the world's greatest power, first, because it is the power of God. It's not a message *about* God's power, it's not direction for tapping into God's power, it's not instruction to get more of God's power – the message itself is God's power. When we preach that God came to earth as a man, lived a sinless life, died and rose for us, and now rules the earth from heaven – we are unleashing a power that makes nuclear bombs look like nerf balls. Those words – mere words – have a power that politicians would sell their soul for. It's divine power. God Himself is at work when the gospel is proclaimed. How could anything man do compete with the power of God? The gospel might seem like mere words, but God acts through them with divine power.

Second, the gospel is the world's greatest power because it is the power of salvation. Those simple words reach out and grab wicked, sinful people, and remake them from the inside out. Evil desires are replaced with godly desires. Selfish, greedy, hateful people are transformed into generous, caring, loving people. People who resented and resisted God come to love and obey God. People who were devoted to immediate success are now focused on eternal rewards. People who were heading to eternal punishment – indeed who deserved hell – are now guaranteed a place in heaven. The gospel makes people entirely different, and in so doing changes the course of history. No army, no diplomat, no president or king, no tycoon can match the power of the gospel.

Third, the gospel is the world's greatest power because it is universal. Bill Gates has power over your computer (unless you own a Macintosh) and computers all over the world, but he has no influence over the billions of people who do not own a computer. George Bush is perhaps the most powerful man on earth. He commands the great American military, but billions of people are little affected by our arms. Let's see, who else is there? Alan Greenspan has been named the most influential man due to his enormous influence with the American economy. Certainly the Beatles had a huge effect on western culture, but two of them are dead now. You get the point. There is nothing which has an impact on people all over the world except the gospel. This message can be translated into any language and communicated in any culture and it always changes people. Everyone it touches is changed forever, and potentially no one is outside its reach. the gospel is the only universal power in the world.

Finally, the gospel is the world's greatest power because it alone creates righteousness in sinful people. Other means of salvation operate by changing behavior. Islam enslaves its people because that is the only way to make them righteous. Communism enslaves people because it knows no other way to make them good. No other religion makes people righteous because no other religion has the power to change

them. Paul will develop this point at great length in Romans, where he will show how God revealed His righteousness first in the life of Christ, and then in the lives of His followers. And the righteousness created by the gospel is not the fake, external righteousness of Islam or communism, but the true, powerful righteousness of God. It is *divine* righteousness – and no human can create that. The righteousness of God can come only from God.

### ***Tapping into God's Power***

The book of Romans is a careful and thorough treatment of the power of the gospel. In it Paul explains in detail how God takes sinful people and makes them righteous. But right at the outset he gives us the key to salvation. It's faith. This divine power we have been talking about is available to anyone and everyone on earth. You might be a Jew or Gentile, civilized or barbarian, rich or poor, smart or dumb, good or bad, but these things are irrelevant. Absolutely anyone can experience this amazing power in his own life. But there is only one way to get it, and that's through faith. You can't work yourself into God's favor. You can't do enough good things to gain merit with God. You can't earn status with God. But you can experience His power to save by trusting Him.

Now that might seem a simple matter. After all, who wouldn't believe God? Who wouldn't trust himself to the creator of the universe and redeemer of mankind? Well, many people. We come back to where we started. By ordinary human standards the gospel seems so ridiculous, so impotent, most people can't believe it really does what it claims. They hear that God promises to transform them into better people, to give them life, and to save them from eternal punishment – and it's just too much to believe. They listen briefly, and then move on to something more useful, more interesting, more entertaining. Only those who go against the grain, who believe what God says is true, who trust Him – only those receive the salvation He offers.

### ***Conclusion***

Do you realize the implications of what we have been saying? Do you see that what we have been doing here tonight is by far the most significant thing that has happened all day? Do you know that when you tell your friends about Christ you are unleashing a nuclear force in their lives? Do you see that the Bible studies all over campus are forward elements in the battle for this university? Can you see that the power of believers, when we tell others the gospel, is an unstoppable force on this campus?

So why don't we see more results? Why don't we see God doing more at Lehigh? Why aren't people coming to Christ every week? Why isn't the church growing more rapidly? Is it because we aren't telling others about Christ? And is that because we are ashamed of Him? And are we ashamed of Christ because we have been cowed into believing that the gospel is a bit ridiculous, a bit childish, not adequate for strong, intelligent, handsome Lehigh students? Really, do you believe the gospel is the power of God that saves people, or was Paul just overcome with enthusiasm here? Are these verses true, or is Paul misleading us?

If this is true, if the gospel is the power of God, if we really believe it – this campus will rock like nothing before ever hit it. If you here tonight are unashamed of the gospel, are convinced of its power, are captivated by the love of Christ – God will use you to change the course of history in this place.

So shall we charge out of here, pumped up to tell everyone about Christ? Sure, but not on the strength of your enthusiasm. Enthusiasm, even religious enthusiasm, is nothing more than a human response. By yourself you cannot proclaim the gospel with the boldness of Paul. On your own you will soon be overcome by fear and embarrassment again. Some of you may be thinking this already. Perhaps in the

past you have sought to witness, but you failed. Now you are fearful that you can't do it. You are thinking, "This message sounds good, but it doesn't work for me. Maybe for some people, but I've tried it and the power wasn't there."

Whether you are excited or intimidated tonight is irrelevant, because the power we are talking about is not only effective in unbelievers – it works in believers, too. The gospel is the power of God to bring unbelievers to a saving knowledge of Christ, and it is the power of God to transform believers into His fruitful servants. God doesn't usually use brilliantly gifted people to do His work anyway. He uses ordinary people like you. The power of the gospel is not in your boldness, or clarity of thought, or brilliance of speech. The power of the gospel is from God. God works through His message to save sinners, and He uses ordinary people to reach them. It is *His* power, not yours, which is effective. Lord Jesus, reveal your power in us!

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