

Strengthening the Believers

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn in our Bibles together to Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 1, and you'll find that on page 939 in the Big Visitor's Bibles, page 939, and I'm reading the first 17 verses of Romans, chapter 1.

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh, and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness, by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ, our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you, who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.

For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow, by God's will, I may now at last succeed in coming to you.

For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.

[2 : 02] I want you to know, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you, but thus far have been prevented, in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles.

I am under obligation, both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also, who are in Rome.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it, the righteousness of God is revealed, from faith for faith.

As it is written, the righteous shall live by faith. Well, friends, let's bow our heads and we'll pray for a moment before we turn to this passage.

Dear God, our Father, we think of the Apostle Paul and his ministry and his great desire to get this gospel preached, both by himself and many others, all over the world.

[3 : 10] We think of his desire to go to Rome, to see the Christians there, to continue to preach the gospel there, and to go on beyond Rome, to Spain and further. And our dear Father, we think of the way in which this vision for the gospel reaching out into all corners of the globe has been taken up by countless Christians over the centuries.

And we're so grateful to you for the way in which this good news of the only way to be saved has caught the imagination and fired the hearts of so many. And therefore today, dear Father, we want to pray for those who continue to be engaged in the work of evangelism and in the work of teaching the Bible and teaching teachers of the Bible too.

We want to pray especially for those who are engaged in the ministry of training men and women in Bible teaching, in evangelism, in many kinds of work that are going to open up this wonderful life-saving gospel to others.

And we thank you for those institutions and colleges, larger and smaller, all over the world where this kind of training is going on, where people who want to grow and become useful go to learn and to come to love and to understand the Bible more deeply.

And as the Lord Jesus has taught us, dear Father, we ask you, as the Lord of the harvest, to continue to send out more people into the harvest field so that the harvest may be reaped and the

rejoicing in heaven should be greater and greater as more people hear and receive and respond to the gospel message.

[4 : 46] So please, dear Father, help this work. Please continue to supply people who are keen and devoted and prepared to give up their lives for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of reaching many with these wonderful words of truth and salvation.

And these things we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, our plan, friends, God willing, for the next five weeks, the five Wednesdays in November, is to look at just a small part of Romans chapter 1, namely verses 8 to 18, under this overall title, The Gospel According to Romans chapter 1.

Now, in a way, it's perhaps slightly unsatisfactory to have just a little portion of chapter 1 without heading further into the hinterland of Romans. Romans has a great hinterland, as you know, but maybe we'll be able to pursue the journey a little further in the months to come.

But even just looking at these few verses, I hope we'll have the effect of confirming our desire to follow Christ as Paul the Apostle followed him so faithfully and with such devotion and joy.

So we'll pick up the story today at verse 8. At this point in the letter, Paul the Apostle has left behind his introductory remarks, which are about the nature of the Gospel, and we leave behind his greeting to the Roman Christians, and we enter this little passage, 8 to 13, which is what I'd like to speak about today, which is about Paul's heartfelt longing to go to Rome and visit the Christians who live there.

[6 : 24] Now, he'd never been to Rome, but this is what this passage is all about. Look at the way he puts it in verse 11. I long to see you. That's where I want to be.

And verse 10. Always in my prayers asking that somehow, by God's will, I may now at last succeed in coming to you. Or look at verse 13.

I want you to know, brothers, that I've often intended to come to you, but thus far have been prevented. And let me just mention, no need to turn it up, but let me mention chapter 15 and verse 23, where Paul says, I have been longing for many years to see you.

So this is the dominant theme in these few verses. Paul is no hermit, shutting himself away amidst books and silence. No, he has a burning desire to visit Rome, not so as to see its buildings or its culture, not to go there as a sightseer or a tourist.

The thing about Rome which attracts him and compels him is not the Colosseum, not the theatres. It's that little group of people who belong to Jesus Christ who live there.

[7 : 37] I long to see you, verse 11. That's what I really want. Now, why does the Apostle long to see them like this? Well, he spells it out in verse 11, where he says, I long to see you that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you.

Now, that clearly implies something, doesn't it? If he longs to give them something to strengthen them, the implication is that they're not very strong. They're Christians.

There's no question about that. You've only got to glance back to verses 6 and 7 to see how Paul greets them. They're the saints. They're the ones who belong to Jesus Christ. So they're Christian believers, and yet the Apostle Paul can see that they're not yet as strong as they might be.

So when he writes of longing to see them, it's not because he wants to meet them on a hail fellow well met kind of basis, sort of let's have a meal together and sing a few songs around the piano, mere human comradeship, not at all.

He longed to see them for a much more precious and pressing reason. He wanted to give them something which would strengthen them spiritually. The authorised version puts a helpful slant on this by translating, I long to see you to the end that you may be established.

[8 : 56] Established. It makes me think of the process whereby you might plant a tree in your garden. You stick the acorn or the horse chestnut under the soil, and if all goes well, in three or four years, it's perhaps three or four feet tall.

It's vital. It's growing. It's a good specimen. But it's not yet established. A wind might come along or a deer and uproot it and get rid of it. So it needs to be strengthened.

Now that's the way Paul the Apostle is looking at the Christians in Rome. They're alive. They're vital. Look at verse 8. He says, I thank God for you because your faith is being broadcast all over the world.

So the Mediterranean bush telegraph was buzzing with the news that a vigorous church now existed in the capital city. And Paul was delighted to hear about it, and he thanked God for it.

But he knew that they were not yet strong, and that is why he longed to see them, to build them up, to establish them. Paul, of course, knew that conversion is not the end of the story.

[9 : 57] It's the beginning. The new Christian needs to grow in strength. He doesn't start strong. He starts a baby. When he's first born again, when he's first converted, he's very much alive.

A newborn baby is a very living thing, isn't it? But he's helpless spiritually, just as a newborn baby is helpless physically. So what sort of dangers is the newborn Christian open to?

Why does he need, in Paul's phrase, to be strengthened? Well, first of all, he has a powerful enemy in the form of the devil. You know what the Apostle Peter says in his fifth chapter of his first letter? Your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to influence? Devour, eat up. He's after us. He's an implacable foe.

And his intentions towards us are never gentlemanly. And when we first become Christians, the devil takes a very special interest in us. He tries every trick in his book so as to topple us and to make us give up.

[11 : 00] He'll try psychological manipulation. I wonder if he's tried this on you. Can it really be true? He whispers in our ear that something of permanent and real and objective value happened on that Roman gibbet nearly 2,000 years ago.

Has that death really altered your eternal destiny and put you right with God? That's a tall order, isn't it, to believe that? Now, as you grow as a Christian, you become increasingly able to cope with that kind of attack.

You learn to buckle on your spiritual armour. But as a new Christian, that kind of devilish temptation can be very distressing. Or the devil might simply try frontal attacks in the realm of drink or sex or laziness or dishonesty.

Or perhaps you'll seek to drive a wedge between yourself and another Christian in the fellowship. That was a problem at Philippe, wasn't it? Where there were two grand Christian ladies called Euodia and Syntyche who fell out with each other.

And their disagreement has been remembered in Scripture ever since. And Paul wrote to them to say, Stop it, sisters. You must be reconciled to each other. That's the devil's work. Then, in addition to these attacks, there's the whole area of doctrine, which is a much more subtle scheme of the devil's because it can seem to be so spiritual.

[12 : 19] The temptations of drink and sex and dishonesty may be very difficult to withstand. But at least their real character is plain for all to see. But the devil's temptation to believe false doctrine is a much subtler thing.

And it's often far more deadly. And as we get to know Paul's letters better and the New Testament letters of Peter and John and Jude, we come to realise that very large parts of them are written for this precise purpose of teaching young Christians to distinguish truth from falsehood in doctrine.

The letter to the Galatians, for example, that was written to a fine young church who, because they were spiritually youthful, they gave way to the influence of false teachers. Through Paul's preaching, God had established this church in Galatia, up in modern Turkey.

But after a short time, the church there began to be visited by and influenced by teachers, people of Jewish background, who were saying to the Christians, you know, it's all very well you folk turning to Jesus as the Messiah.

That's okay. But if you really want to be right with God in every department, you need to submit to the Old Testament law, which after all is God's law given by the prophet Moses. And therefore you Gentile believers, you cannot be Christians in the fullest sense until you undergo circumcision and submit to the Jewish rituals.

[13 : 46] Now all this was going on up in Galatia and the Galatian Christians, because they were young, they were listening to these persuasive teachers who were insisting on these Jewish rites and so on, and they were nodding their heads in approval.

You could picture them there in the congregation, they were smiling and saying, yes, yes, of course, this fine teaching that these people are giving us, they've got a point which somehow the poor old apostle Paul seems to have missed when he was here with us.

Now the truth of that situation was that these persuasive teachers were undermining the very gospel itself. In effect, they were denying justification by faith and they were drawing the Galatian Christians back to justification by works of the law.

In other words, they were denying the freedom of the gospel and they were enticing the Galatians back to a form of slavery. But because the Galatians were young and inexperienced in their faith, and because these teachers were extremely plausible and attractive, the heresy gained ground. And when Paul the apostle heard of it, heard what was going on up in Galatia, he just about turned grey overnight. And he wrote them that impassioned letter exposing the heresy and pleading with them to reject its influence.

[15:00] You foolish Galatians! Great line, isn't it? You foolish Galatians! Chapter 3, verse 1. Who has bewitched you? Who has pulled the wool over your eyes? Cast a spell over you so that you can't see through this false teaching.

Christ has set you free from all these things. Stay free. Don't submit to a yoke of slavery again. Now this problem of false teaching, it's a perennial problem.

We could illustrate it from all over the New Testament letters. It's not an overstatement to say that a large part of the New Testament letters were written to combat false teaching in the churches and to enable the Christians to distinguish truth from error.

And surely this is what lies behind Paul's words here in Romans 1, verse 11. He wants to visit the church in Rome so as to give them something which will make them strong.

Rome was, well, all roads led to Rome. That saying was literally true. It was the centre of all power and communication in the ancient world. It was the most important city in the world.

[16:07] What you might say perhaps London was in the 19th century, what Glasgow is today. Sorry, Washington. Washington is today. It was such an important place. And so any kind of religious influence that was going in the ancient world was bound to come to Rome.

And if these young Christians were not strengthened to discern truth from error, the gospel might very quickly lose its foothold in the world's capital city. And Paul knew this.

That is why he so wanted to see them. He puts the problem and the danger like this in Ephesians. Then we will no longer be infants tossed back and forth by the waves and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.

Now if we say, but surely error is obvious and equally the truth of the gospel is obvious, if we say that, we are in cloud cuckoo land.

We only have to open our eyes and look around us. There are all kinds of religious products on the market today. If it were easy for people to distinguish the true from the false, the false would simply have no following.

[17:15] They would be forced to shut up shop. But they do have a following because they are attractive to those who have not grown strong and mature in the faith. So young Christians need to be strengthened in every generation.

I remember when I had been a Christian for just two or three years, I was in my late teens, I read two or three books by a man called Harry Williams who was, I think he was an Anglican monk. He is long dead now.

And I thought these books were marvellous. But actually they subtly denied some of the major tenets of the Christian faith. But I couldn't see it at the time. And I remember rather proudly saying to an older Christian friend of mine, you know, I've been reading such and such by Harry Williams. I think it's terrific stuff. And I'm very glad that I told my friend I was reading these books because he took the wind out of my sails and he said, you haven't been reading that nonsense, have you? I had to stop and think.

Your pastors, some of you I know are Tron members, but many come from other churches, your pastors are not in the least bit worried that you're going to become Sikhs or Buddhists or start painting your faces with chalk or worshipping the rain gods or the sun gods.

[18:25] That's not where the dangers lie, is it? The dangers are much closer to hand. They always have been in 20 centuries of church history. Heresy generally builds its nest in the church, not a million miles from the church.

And the nest is generally built in the pulpit rather than in the pew. That's what happened to the Galatians and the Colossians and the Corinthians. And Paul knew that the same thing could easily happen in Rome.

And that is why he says, I long to see you, to make you strong. Well, circumstances dictated that he wasn't able to get there and see them, at least not then, so he did the very next best thing.

He wrote them a letter. Well, we can be very glad that he did. We don't know whether it made its original recipients strong, but we do know that this letter has strengthened Christians since then. And that's why we study it and keep reading it, and we'll continue to study it over these next few weeks, so that we too should be made stronger and more mature in understanding and distinguishing the true from the false.

[19 : 31] Now, let me just go on to one other thing. And that is, it's a rather different subject. It's the question of how Paul discerned God's leading and how he made decisions in his life.

We generally imagine, at least I think we do, that making wise decisions is pretty difficult in our own case, but it must have been pretty easy for a man of the spiritual stature of Paul the Apostle.

But if that's what we imagine, we're not right. Just think carefully about Paul's words again. He says at the end of Romans, chapter 15, I've been longing for many years to see you.

Many? Five years? Ten years? Fifteen? Quite a long time. So at the time of writing, Paul has been intensely longing to visit these Roman Christians for many years.

Now back to chapter 1, verse 13, he says, I want you to know I've often intended to come to you, but thus far have been prevented. Isn't that interesting? Many years of longing to see them, which have led to many plans being made.

[20 : 35] Many times Paul had pulled out his let's pocket diary or looked at his year planner up on the kitchen wall and he'd said, I'm going to go to Rome on such and such a date. He perhaps even sent a friend, Timothy or Silas, down to the harbour to book a passage on a Roman trading ship, which was on its way back to Italy.

It wasn't just a pipe dream. He says, I've intended it, I've planned it. Diaries, bookings, definite intentions. And what's more, if you look at verse 10, he tells us too that he prayed about his plans and his longings.

I pray that the way may be opened up for me to come. So just put yourself in Paul's shoes for a moment. There you are longing, year in, year out, for many years to go to Rome.

Many times you've formulated a definite plan of travel. It's constantly been a matter of prayer for you. You're not a man who preaches in the spirit but plans in the flesh.

Not at all. You pray. And yet, this longed for visit was never possible. How do you feel? How did Paul feel? Frustrated, I guess, and perplexed.

[21 : 43] Now, I take this as a real comfort that if a great and exceptional Christian like Paul could have prayed and planned and longed for many years to do something and yet was frustrated, if that could happen to a man like Paul, it could happen to Christians like you and me as well.

It gives the lie to the idea that God will necessarily bring instant guidance to us. All of us go through problems of decision making. For one Christian, it's the problem of housing.

Do we move house or do we stay where we are? For another, it's a question of job or calling. You can become sure that God wants you to do such and such and you go through all the channels, you make your application and so on, get your references together, you go for your job interview and a few days later the letter comes back and it says, Dear Mr. Lobb, we appreciated your qualifications and your sense of humour and we're sure that there's a most useful and attractive good field of service waiting for you somewhere but...

And the letter in short turns you down. How do you come to terms with that? Many of us have been through that kind of thing. That job, that field of service, it's the one thing you've been wanting to do for donkey's years.

You've been longing for it, praying for it, planning for it, but you're prevented. Romans 1.13 I've often intended to come to you, but I've been prevented.

[23 : 07] Now isn't it a comfort to know that Paul went through the same kind of heartaches and frustrations that we sometimes have to go through. And this was his position for many years.

Did he ever get there, to Rome? Well, yes he did. He did. The fascinating story, the whole thing is told in the closing chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. Romans 1.13 imprisoned for two years at Caesarea for no crime, eventually taken in chains as a prisoner on a cargo ship, shipwrecked for a fortnight, washed up more dead than alive on the island of Malta, bitten by a viper, put onto another ship, and eventually, after months of great hardship, he got to Rome in chains.

In chains. And then he met these Roman brothers that he'd been longing to see for so many years. Just glance back a page to Acts 28, verse 15.

And there you have, in that verse, simply put, the fulfilment of Paul's longing. You see how the brothers from Rome come out to meet him and when they heard about us, they came as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us.

Now here's the moment. On seeing them, these Roman Christians, Paul thanked God and took courage. Isn't that lovely? After all those awful things, he thanked God.

[24 : 32] That's the amazing statement that he was grateful to God. Think of what he'd suffered and been through. Some Christians would have lost patience years before, perhaps might even have given up the faith.

But the moment Paul saw those brothers, he was overwhelmed with a sense of how very good God had been to him. And he fell on his knees and thanked the Lord. Thank you, Father, that after all these years you've answered my prayers and have guided me to these brothers.

And as for his longing to give them a spiritual gift, to make them strong, to strengthen them, was that fulfilled? Well, look at the very last verse of Acts. There he was in Rome, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. So he says in Romans 1.13, I've been prevented from doing this until now, but eventually, all those years later, he was able to strengthen those Roman brothers without hindrance and teach them. Now, friends, half a minute more? Okay? Three practical lessons for us. First of all, thinking about how to make decisions in a godly way, it's often a long-term matter.

[25 : 51] It can be many years, many hindrances later, before God's purposes for us work out. Therefore, we can be patient and unworried about these things.

Secondly, if hardship and hindrance and physical suffering and mental stress, if they were the lot of the Apostle Paul in his life and he was a man of God, it is unrealistic for us to expect ease and comfort.

We won't get it. Necessarily. Third, making good decisions about Christian service is a matter of being submitted to God's will.

See how he puts it in Romans 1, verse 10. Always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will, I may at last succeed in coming to you.

Now, I'm sure that's the ultimate answer to frustrations and perplexities that we might have. we may want something intensely and never be given it. That happened even to Jesus.

[26 : 52] He wanted something intensely at one moment and that was not to go to the cross. But he prayed, nevertheless, not what I want, but what you, your will, wants. So he was submitted to his Father's will and it was the best place for him to be.

So here is Paul. He had a life of great hardship as he preached the Gospel. He didn't live in a soft age. We live in a comparatively soft age today, at least in this country. He expected pain as well as joy in serving the Master.

He knew all about imprisonment and finally, he knew all about martyrdom. But it was okay. He was submitted to God's will. He didn't think for a moment that God had misguided him or let him down. He was content and happy and deeply thankful for what the Lord provided for him. and friends, you and I can follow his example. Let's pray together for a moment.

Our dear Father, we do again simply want to thank you for this example. We know Paul is an example to us as he followed Christ's example. And here is the example of this man who was so full-blooded and devoted in his commitment to you.

[28 : 08] And our prayer is that you will help us to have that same spirit of the joy, the romance, the great desire to serve you and to please you and to preach the words of the gospel and pass them on wherever we're able to.

So please strengthen us. Give us what we need to make us strong, we pray. And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. to life as we exit we can stop and there is the we begin for before we can't help read as we and begin as we have this the love.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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