

ROMANS: UNASHAMED

1. Gospel (Romans 1:1-17 / 16:1-27)

The backdrop

One evening, Hien Pham decided he was going to give up on God.

He was finished with faith. Done with Christianity.

Having been raised a devout Buddhist in Vietnam, he became a Christian in the 1970s when an American soldier gave him a Bible.

Hien then served as a translator for American missionaries, but when they left, the Communists turned on him, imprisoned him as a political prisoner, and, after months of beatings and brainwashing, it seemed they had finally broken him.

He was giving up on God – because God had given up on him.

The day after this fateful decision, he was cleaning out the guards' toilet block, retching as he reached in with his bare hands.

All of a sudden he saw a scrap of paper with writing on it. He hid it away and later, in his cell, after cleaning off the excrement, found that he had stumbled on a scrap of the book of Romans from the Bible.

The guards had been using pages from a confiscated Bible as toilet paper.

Hien, who had felt abandoned by God, began to read:

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose...

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or

sword? ...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." Romans 8:28, 35, 37

That night, Hien decided not to give up on God, since God had clearly not given up on him.

Even just a scrap of Romans torn out of the Bible transformed his life.

And though the mighty Roman empire has long since ceased to exist, the letter to the Romans written by the Apostle Paul in around AD 55 has continued to transform lives down through the centuries.

It was pivotal to the conversion of St Augustine in the fourth century, was a catalyst for the Reformation led by Martin Luther in the sixteenth century, and even led to the salvation of Hercule Poirot!

More recently, Sir David Suchet (otherwise known as Hercule Poirot) became a Christian when he read Romans in a hotel room.

This letter was originally written to ordinary people in Rome facing tough circumstances, like Hien Pham.

It conveys in plain terms such great news that those who read it may never be the same again.

I was watching *Would I Lie to You* on television recently. One of Lee Mac's claims was that, whenever he reads a book, he goes straight to the end to read the last few lines and to see how it finishes.

To better understand the context and place of this letter to the Romans – we need to start at the end.

That's where Paul names 27 individuals whom he personally greets. Paul is writing a very personal letter to probably five house churches in Rome – to a spiritual family in a hostile context.

“Imagine families and friends gathering with the doors locked, risking their safety. They were real people, tired from work, oppressed, hurting, yet hungry for the truth.” Andrew Ollerton

The Roman church was a mixed church. A very diverse group of believers – Jews and Gentiles, males and females, masters and slaves, rich and poor.

This showed the richness and possibilities of Christian community, but it also led to tensions and difficulties.

Several years earlier, the Jews had been banished from Rome by Emperor Claudius ([Acts 18:2](#)), only returning after he died. So there was a mix of established Gentile believers, with their flavour of Christianity and their traditions, and then returning Jewish believers, who brought with them a different emphasis on various habits and practices.

So, Paul spends quite a lot of time focusing on unity.

“Today, when people from very different backgrounds, cultures and pay grades try to work together, it's easy for misunderstandings to arise and ghettos to form.” Andrew Ollerton

Paul's goal throughout the book of Romans is to remind them and us that “in Christ” far more unites us than should ever divide us.”

The ultimate goal is that [“with one mind and one voice \(we\) may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” \(Romans 15:6\)](#)

Paul sends his emissary -Phoebe – perhaps a business woman with his letter to the Roman churches. She will deliver it and read it for them.

The big themes

Today we will look at a couple of those early key themes – and primarily at Paul's defence and declaration of the gospel – the good news of Christianity.

Paul introduces the theme of the **gospel**, which he unpacks in the rest of his letter.

Romans 1:15-16

“I am eager to preach the gospel.”

“I am not ashamed of the gospel.”

“The eternal city seemed to have everything. What could a message about a crucified Jew have to offer Roman citizens with hot tubs, slaves and theatre tickets.”

“Paul knew what it was to feel intimidated, to question whether the simple message of Jesus was compelling enough for a culture with such glamorous alternatives.”

Andrew Ollerton

In an age of premier league football, social media influencers, Netflix and Nandos – perhaps like me you sometimes feel awkward about your faith – your relationship with Jesus.

The eternal city seemed all-conquering, all-powerful – spreading its message and kingdom throughout the known world. All roads – literally – led to Rome.

As Phoebe reads aloud the letter to the gathered house churches behind locked and closed doors and curtains – Paul's words pump courage into their somewhat cowed souls.

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.” Romans 1:16

Our series on Romans is called **“Unashamed”**. And this verse is the keystone verse – the thrust of what Paul is saying to this mixed and diverse group of believers living in the shadow of such political and military power.

You want power? I will show you power. I am not ashamed or embarrassed by Roman claims to power – or statements that Christianity is somehow irrelevant or has nothing to say. This good news has within it the power of God to save people.

It did then.

And it still does now.

A couple of reasons Paul is unashamed of the gospel:

1) Our enemies have been defeated by the risen Jesus (1:1-6)

Evangelion – announcement of good news.

The Roman empire used various propaganda machines to spread this good news – coins, pottery, images, statutes – which spread the message that the emperor was “son of god” and “lord” and “Saviour” of the empire.

In this context, Romans 1:1-4 stands toe to toe with Caesar in pronouncing a new Lord, a different kind of saviour.

The power of the gospel that Paul refers to in verse 16 is drawn directly from the “power” of the risen Christ in verse 4:

“Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God – the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Romans 1:1-4

The Romans would parade their victories and their vanquished enemies and they would declare the evangelion – good news – of what they had achieved.

For Paul, the gospel is the announcement of a decisive victory that has already happened. The outcome has already been secured.

Jesus was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead – he is the Lord. He is Jesus Christ our Lord.

“He stripped all the spiritual tyrants in the universe of their sham authority at the Cross and marched them naked through the streets.” (Colossians 2:15 TM)

Sin, death, sickness, Satan – all spiritual powers and authorities – Jesus took them captive – gaining victory over them, and parading them.

This is the power of the gospel.

We are all of us facing these enemies in some form this morning. Sin, death, sickness and Satan.

Paul is not ashamed of the gospel because he knows Jesus is Lord and that he has conquered every one of these enemies by his death and resurrection from the dead.

And this power of God outshines and outperforms any political or military or philosophical power – it is the power of the Son of God and his resurrection from the dead.

There is power in the name of Jesus.

Paul knows it and he declares it. And he strengthens the resolve of these house church Christians as Phoebe reads his letter to them.

I am not ashamed!!!

The second reason Paul is unashamed of the gospel:

2) Through the righteousness of God everyone is welcome

There were lots of hierarchies in Rome. The senators lived in their villas and wealth on the seven hills. Others held slaves and held sway.

Even within the church, there were questions around authentic faith and who was a better Christian or more worthy follower. Jews or Gentiles, males or females, rich or poor, educated or no.

This gospel is the power of God that brings salvation to....

Everyone who is worthy?

Everyone who has a certain background?

Everyone who has social standing?

Everyone who is wealthy?

1:16-17 This gospel is the power of God for salvation to **everyone who believes**: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel, the **righteousness of God** is revealed – a righteousness that is **by faith** from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith".

Everyone who believes.

By faith. From **first to last**.

Belief, faith, trust, confidence in the Son of God – in Jesus.

There is no pecking order.

There is no exclusion zone.

No-one is beyond the gospel.

No-one can earn the righteousness of God.

This is for you this morning. This power. This good news. This gospel.

If you are going to be right with God – it is “by faith”.

It is by putting your trust in Jesus. It is by taking hold of his hand and letting him guide you.

From first to last. From start to finish. From birth to death.

This revelation from Romans came to Martin Luther and his efforts to be right with God through asceticism.

This verse changed his life and the church and society.

There was on the back of this truth alone a great reformation.

Luther looked at all the ways that the Catholic church was trying to get people to earn their faith and pay their way – selling indulgences and demanding penances. And Martin Luther had his own way of trying to please God and pay for his sin – fasting endlessly, praying endlessly, depriving himself of all worldly pleasures

But nothing would ever be enough.

Not for him. Not for us.

Jesus has already won the victory.

He has done it.

Not us.

If you are going to be made right with God – righteous – it is by believing, by faith, by placing the full weight of your confidence on him.

“The key is that the gospel reveals God's saving action, which does not depend on our own moral standing or ethnic background. Jewish blood line, Sabbath observance, foreskin removal – these are no longer the basis of who is “in” or “out”.

Instead God's faithful action through the gospel has brought salvation to "everyone who believes".

Andrew Ollerton

The word gospel appears 6x in this opening passage. The word faith appears 5x.

"I am not ashamed of the gospel!"

"The righteous will live by faith!"

Paul, with the help of his spokesperson Phoebe, is going to take us on a journey through this letter.

Andrew Ollerton likens it to climbing a mountain!

May we be transformed by the power of this gospel.

May we believe in the resurrected Jesus and put our faith and trust in him.

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile." Romans 1:16

Community group questions and discussion points:

1. **Romans 1:16 says, “I am not ashamed of the gospel.”** What do you think Paul meant by being “ashamed” of the gospel, and what might that look like for a Christian today?
2. **Paul describes the gospel as “the power of God that brings salvation.”** How is God’s power different from the kinds of power our culture tends to value—wealth, influence, status, politics, popularity or success?
3. The Roman Christians lived in a culture where **Caesar was presented as “lord” and “saviour.”** What are some things that compete with Jesus for our allegiance today? Where are you most tempted to give them greater importance than Christ?
4. **Jesus’ resurrection demonstrated that he is Lord and that the decisive victory has already been won.** How might knowing that Jesus has defeated sin, death and the powers of darkness change the way we face fear, suffering or uncertainty?
5. Paul says the gospel is for **“everyone who believes.”** What does this teach us about who is welcomed into God’s family? Are there people or groups we are tempted to see as more—or less—worthy of God’s grace?
6. The Roman church included **Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slaves and free people, rich and poor.** What differences can create division within churches or Christian communities today? What could it look like to intentionally pursue unity?
7. **“The righteous will live by faith.”** What is the difference between trusting in Jesus and trying to prove ourselves worthy of God? Are there areas where you find yourself still trying to “earn” God’s approval?

8. Think about Hien Pham's experience of discovering Romans when he felt that **God had abandoned him**. Have you ever experienced a season when God seemed distant? What truths about the gospel can help us hold on during those seasons?
9. Paul was "**eager to preach the gospel**." Who in your life might need to hear the good news of Jesus? What might it look like to share your faith naturally and courageously with that person?
10. **Personal challenge:** If you genuinely lived this week believing, "I am not ashamed of the gospel," what would change? Identify **one specific situation, relationship or conversation** where you can put that into practice.