



In the fall of 1998, I was a Junior Business major at the University of San Francisco. Instead of moving into the Phelan Hall dorms, I found myself in Madrid, Spain at St. Louis University, preparing to spend four months studying abroad. I was a relatively new Christian and had never traveled that far out of the U.S., let alone live abroad for that long. I was excited, but scared. Within the first few weeks of school, as far as I could tell, I was the only male Christian student in the entire international school of over 200 students. I made friends quickly, began my studies, but, like most everyone else, I started to party with my classmates.

Here's what you may not know about Spain: They love to party! It's very typical for Spanish young people to start the night (Thursday-Sunday) at midnight and not get home from the clubs and bars until 7 am in the morning. In Madrid, most parks were turned into "botellones." Basically young people flood into the parks and drink all night. Spain is a beautiful country but it's also a spiritually dark place. Most Spaniards identify themselves with the Roman Catholic Church but only a small percentage of those actually practice their faith. And that's where I found myself. Abroad, on my own for the first time, with one Christian friend and no Christian church or community. It wasn't long before my faith began to shrivel. I wanted to honor God and serve Him, but the odds seemed stacked against me.

But one day I noticed a flier in our school's cafeteria inviting students to a Bible study put on by the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. I couldn't believe my eyes! I was so excited to finally hear about something like that. So I took the metro, 45 minutes away, to attend the Bible study. It was there that I met several IFES staff workers and a handful of other college-age students that were all trying to seek God together. Soon after, I found the only English speaking church in Madrid, another 45 minute metro commute, and began attending services there. I can't tell you how incredibly encouraging it was for me to meet with and have fellowship with other Christians at that time in my life. I was desperate for that kind of encouragement for my faith. Honestly, if it wasn't for those two Christian communities, I am not sure I would have made it out of Madrid with my faith still intact.

Have you ever had that kind of experience in your own life? Have you ever met with another Christian, or attended a Bible study, or gone to a prayer meeting and left incredibly encouraged and filled up? Left thinking, "That is exactly what I needed!" Maybe

you are here this morning and that's what you are looking for. You're discouraged, lonely and looking for a community of faith to support you. Or maybe you're just discouraged and don't know what you can do about it. In these verses we are going to see the second part of Paul's introduction to the churches in Rome. And it's here we learn how even the great Apostle needed encouragement for his faith and longed for fellowship with other Christians. In these verses, he prays for the Roman believers, expresses his desire to spend time with them, and finally, tells them about his obligation to preach the gospel. Let's read Romans 1:8-15.

**First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.**

**I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong— that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.**

**I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome.**

### **Paul's Prayer for Roman Believers**

Paul begins this section by first thanking God for all the believers in Rome. He specifically thanks God for their reputation of faith. Paul actually didn't start the church in Rome. Most likely, after the events of Pentecost in the book of Acts, Jewish Christians started a church in Rome and began to spread the message that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah. And it didn't take long for Christianity to become established in the great city of Rome. The believers there grew in number and were most likely meeting in several house churches by the time of Paul's writing. Paul has heard multiple reports about the incredible faith of the Roman church and what they were doing there. People all over "the world"—the known world at that time—have spread good

Christian “gossip” about what God is doing in and through the Roman church. Paul thanks God for them.

Because of the encouraging reports, Paul is moved to pray for them. He was led to pray often for the believers in Rome. He says he “constantly” and “at all times” prays for them. I don’t think Paul is giving lip service here. You know how we do that around church, right? Sadly, I say all the time “I’ll pray for you” and then go about my week totally forgetting to pray for that person or that need. You do it too! This is the reason why I try to keep a prayer journal and do my best to pray for the requests that come my way, because I forget. Not Paul. He says, “God is my witness!” And all throughout his letters, you see Paul’s heart for the church and his prayers for them.

Not only is Paul praying for the church in Rome, but he tells them that he is praying specifically for an opportunity to visit them. He doesn’t assume it’s God’s will for him to visit Rome, nor does he claim to know what God’s will is. Instead, in prayer, he fully submits to God’s will, whatever that may be. We don’t know why Paul had never been to Rome. Most scholars believe he has been too busy planting churches and preaching the Gospel east of Rome and just hasn’t had the time to make it there. We’ll learn later in chapter 15 of his plans to finally travel to Rome enroute to Spain.

So, what can we learn from this short prayer? Several things. For one, the faith of Roman Christians were a source of encouragement for Paul. This was a grateful and thankful prayer. Has anyone’s faith ever inspired you? Who in your life have you looked up to and been encouraged by their faith? Paul was encouraged and uplifted by the reports he heard coming out of Rome. This led him to pray and be thankful for God’s work in Rome. We too need people in our lives who have “contagious faith.” People who encourage us to press on and to live courageously. People who we say, “Man, I want to live like that.” Whose faith has encouraged you lately? How can you thank God for them this week? If you need to be encouraged by someone’s faith, pick up a good biography on someone like William Wilberforce, Corrie Ten Boom or Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Trust me, you’ll be encouraged by their incredible stories of courageous faith.

I read a story just this week that encouraged my own faith. There was a front-page article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* about a metro-transit operator named Linda Wilson-Allen. She loves the people who ride her bus, learns their names, and waits for them if they’re late and then makes up the time later on her route. A woman in her eighties named Ivy had some heavy grocery bags and was struggling with them. So Linda got out of her bus driver’s seat to carry Ivy’s grocery bags onto the bus. Now Ivy lets other buses pass her stop so she can ride on Linda’s bus.

One day Linda saw a woman named Tanya waiting at a bus stop. She could tell Tanya was new to the area and she was lost. It

was almost Thanksgiving, so Linda said to Tanya, “You’re out here all by yourself. You don’t know anybody. Come on over for Thanksgiving and kick it with me and the kids.” Now they’re friends. Linda has built such a little community of blessing on the bus that passengers offer Linda the use of their vacation homes. They bring her potted plants and flowers. When people found out she likes to wear scarves to accessorize her uniforms, they started giving them as presents to Linda as well.

Think about what a thankless task driving a bus can look like in San Francisco—cranky passengers, engine breakdowns, traffic jams, gum on the seats. You are probably thinking, How does she have this attitude? Here’s what the *Chronicle* writes, “Her mood is set at 2:30 A.M. when she gets down on her knees to pray for 30 minutes.” Why does she pray? The article quotes her, “There is a lot to talk about with the Lord.”

When she gets to the end of her line, she always says, “That’s all. I love you. Take care.” Have you ever had a bus driver tell you, “I love you”? If you are wondering this morning, “Where can I be encouraged in my faith?” I’ll tell you where: on the #45 bus riding through San Francisco. People think, “Where can I find encouraging people like Apostle Paul and the believers in Rome?” I’ll tell you where: behind the wheel of a metro bus.

### **Paul’s Desire to See Them**

After praying for the believers in Rome, Paul explains why he is so eager to see them. He gives several reasons. In verse 11, he says, “*I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong...*” We honestly, don’t know exactly what spiritual gift Paul is talking about imparting. I believe he wants to use his own spiritual gifts of pastoring and preaching to bless the church there. Second, Paul wants to visit so “*that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith.*” This is the wonderful surprise of verse 12. The great Apostle Paul wants to be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith. Encouragement is what I needed in Madrid and what Paul wanted in Rome. He too wanted to sit down in someone’s living room and be encouraged by their faith and also to be an encouragement to them. Isn’t that incredible? Some of us think Paul is a super-hero of faith, and he is. But he was also human. And just like us, he got depressed and discouraged. But, he also knew the power of faith, fellowship and encouragement. So he sought out those things from other believers. If Paul did this, how much more should we?

How are you doing in this area? Do you long for the encouragement and fellowship that only happens when followers of Christ come together? We should never leave our worship gatherings, small groups, or dinner parties having spent time surrounded by God’s people of faith, without feeling encouraged. Sadly, I know this doesn’t always happen. What difference would it make in your life and in mine if we went to church or our small group next week seeking to encourage someone? Instead of thinking,

"What's in this for me?", what if we came with an attitude of, "How can I be a blessing here?" Some of us find it hard to receive that kind of support and encouragement from others. We all need to get better at allowing other Christians to speak words of encouragement to us as well. Paul needed that type of mutual encouragement. You and I need it too.

There's one more reason Paul gives for his desire to visit Rome: he wants to have a harvest among them. He writes, "*I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.*" The word for "harvest" is literally, "fruit." The idea here is Paul wants to gather fruit, not necessarily plant or grow it. As the Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul wanted to reach people for Christ in Rome, the capital city of the Gentile world. Rome is a strategic city for the gospel and Paul wanted to both encourage the church there and evangelize the city. Paul wanted to serve the church by reaching people for Jesus. He looked forward to a harvest of new disciples there.

### **Paul's Obligation to Preach the Gospel**

Paul is so emphatic about his desire to preach the gospel in Rome that he uses some very strong language in these next verses. He writes, "*I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome.*" The word "obligated" can be translated as, "I am a debtor." Paul says, "I owe ya'll!" How is Paul in debt to the Roman church especially if he has never been there? If you are in debt, there are only two ways to get out of it. You either pay the debt back yourself or someone else gives you the money to pay it. It's in the second sense that Paul is indebted to both Greeks and non-Greeks, both wise and foolish. In other words, Paul is indebted to preach to all people everywhere. Why? Because God has revealed the gospel to him (the road to Damascus) and commissioned him to declare the Good News to others. So, in Paul's thinking, he owes people the gospel because of the goodness and grace God has shown him. Paul had a sense of debt to the Roman church. He felt that it was his responsibility, along with the church, to reach people for Christ in Rome. For all these reasons, he was eager to get to Rome.

If you are a follower of Jesus, did you know that you too have an obligation to preach the gospel. You might be thinking, "Wait a second Rob! I am not the Apostle Paul and I don't have the gift of evangelism or preaching!" Some of us believe evangelism is only reserved for people who are good at it. But, Paul spoke about it as an obligation, a debt. It's an obligation because good news is meant to be shared, not kept to ourselves. A debt needs to be paid back. Yes, we are not commissioned in the same way as Paul, but like him, we have a responsibility to make Jesus and his gospel known to others, both by our life and our words. All Christians have been commissioned by Jesus to "*go and make disciples of*

*all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...*" (Matthew 28:19). Sure, some of us are better at that than others, but we all share the same responsibility. How are you doing at sharing your faith with others? Do you feel the same obligation Paul did? If not, it may be an indication that you don't understand the gospel very well.

I think another reason we don't share our faith is because we just don't know how to do it. We think we have to be like the Bible Answer Man in order to share our faith well. You don't. If you are a follower of Jesus, that means he is alive and living in you through the Holy Spirit. That is more than enough for God to use you. Sure, you should be equipped and know what you are doing! But, none of us have any excuse to do and say nothing, while the world around us are spiritually thirsty and spiritually dying. We all have a part to play in God's mission for the church.

Earl Palmer, an author and retired pastor, writes, "When California's Milpitas High School orchestra attempts Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the result is appalling," he said. "I wouldn't be surprised if the performance made old Ludwig roll over in his grave despite his deafness. You might ask: 'Why bother? Why inflict on those poor kids the terrible burden of trying to render what the immortal Beethoven had in mind? Not even the great Chicago Symphony Orchestra can attain that perfection.' My answer is this: The Milpitas High School orchestra will give some people in that audience their only encounter with Beethoven's great Ninth Symphony. Far from perfection, it is nevertheless the only way they will hear Beethoven's message."

Palmer is pointing out that the only way a starving, thirsty, deluded, and suffering world will ever hear the music of the gospel is through you, the body of Christ, which is arguably the worst "high school orchestra" ever. If performance standards are really the most important thing, then the church is in trouble. But God is determined to trade the perfection of his solo performance for the possibility of playing a little improvisational jazz with us, the screechy saxophone players in the kingdom of God's ragtag band. Point is, we are all in the band, and we all have a part to play.

As I have thought and prayed through these eight verses in Paul's introduction, the message that spoke to me has to do with encouragement. Paul tells us here encouragement comes from prayer, faith and fellowship. I believe one of the most important things we need to do as the people of God is to stay encouraged. Why? Because we live in a world that is constantly beating us down and stripping away our faith. And it's so easy to become discouraged.

How do we stay encouraged? What did Paul do? He often went to God in prayer. It's there, in prayer, where we focus on God, the true source of encouragement. In prayer, God becomes bigger and our problems become smaller. Paul did this kind of thing

all the time. Listen to what he wrote the church in Philippi, ***“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”*** (Philippians 4:6-7). If you are discouraged today, before you do anything else, go to God in prayer and tell him about it.

How else can we stay encouraged? Like Paul, we can serve God with others. Paul’s desire was to build up the church in Rome. He wanted, more than anything, to get to Rome so that he could have a harvest among them because of his obligation to preach the gospel. If you really want to get encouraged, share your faith with someone this week. Whenever I have had the chance to share my faith with someone else, I leave that conversation so pumped and excited! It is in those moments where I sense God is using me, God is with me, and where I can feel his power. My wife and I are praying this year that God would give us the opportunity to lead one person to the Lord. If, by his grace we do that, trust me, we’ll both be incredibly encouraged.

How else can we stay encouraged? By spending time with other Christians in community and fellowship. It’s through the body of Christ where you and I can be mutually encouraged by other people’s faith. Some of us stay away from this type of community

because it’s hard for us to be vulnerable and air our dirty laundry. Resist that temptation and get into a loving community with other followers of Christ. Do you have a place, outside of our Sunday worship gatherings, where you are being encouraged by other Christians? If you don’t have a place like that, let us know and we’ll help you.

Since encouragement comes from prayer, faith and fellowship, I want to end with a challenge. This week, will you intentionally look for ways you can be a source of encouragement to someone else? Maybe your boss needs a few encouraging words on Monday. Maybe you need to encourage your spouse today. Whatever it is, let’s be like that church in Rome, where our faith is being reported all over the world. Where people come to our worship gatherings on Sunday or at your small group and are blown away by your love and faith. I want people to say about CPC, “Being with them is like being with Jesus.” We all have a long way to go, but don’t you want that too?

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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