

We've been saved. Alleluia! And now we wait for our savior to return on the clouds and take us home. We've been blessed with hope in our hearts, and we wait. We wait patiently, knowing that God's got it all worked out and there's nothing more for us to do but keep the faith. I'm joking. We don't wait, we work! This morning we continue our study of how the Lord builds his church and what this means as regards our walk with God and with each other.

## OPENING PRAYER

### ROMANS 1:7-12

To all who are beloved of God in Rome, called *as* saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>8</sup>First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world. <sup>9</sup>For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the *preaching of the gospel* of His Son, is my witness *as to* how unceasingly I make mention of you, <sup>10</sup>always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you. <sup>11</sup>For I long to see you so that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established; <sup>12</sup>that is, that I may be encouraged together with you *while* among you, each of us by the other's faith, both yours and mine. <sup>13</sup>I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented so far) so that I may obtain some fruit among you also, even as among the rest of the Gentiles. <sup>14</sup>I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. <sup>15</sup>So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”: So Paul addressed God's children in Rome. He began with, “To all who are loved (or *agaped*) by God.”

When a person wrote a letter back then, as now, they usually began with something like, “Dear Stephanus. I hope you are well. I am fine,” etcetera. But Paul intentionally imputed on fellow believers God's grace – God's undeserved favor – and the peace, the *shalom*, of Jesus.

Grace, *charis*, is central to Paul's teaching in all 13 of his letters. For it's by grace we are saved from hell; it's by grace we are made whole in Christ; it's by grace we're forgiven all our sins; it's by grace we were made heirs of God's kingdom; it's by grace we see light despite the darkness all around.

When Paul talked about the *shalom* of God, he was talking about the peace of mind Christians have because the burden of sin has been lifted from our hearts, and because we know that on the other side of death, God awaits us in glory.

Paul was showing us how to think. He begins his letter with thankfulness, for thankfulness lies at the very heart of his identity in Christ.

What would the church look like if Christians were thankful? I remember a time when I was angry; I was angry at other people, at life, at God. I was frustrated, anxious, and annoyed. All the time. But one day I woke up, and I realized the cause of all my problems was not other people or God. It was me. So I was angry at myself for being angry. And that went on for a while.

What would the church look like if Christians were thankful? It's easy to be distraught about the political scene, and about other people, or about one's own life. Without hardly any effort we can feed our suspicions, envy, and grudges. A while back I talked to a guy with whom I hadn't spoken for six years. We'd been friends since 9<sup>th</sup> grade, which would be approximately 40-years. I called him, and he asked me, "Are you still mad at me?" I said, "No. I can't ever remember why I was mad at you. But I keep remembering all the things we did together, and I'm thankful." He laughed. "Good, me too," he said.

What would the church look like if Christians were thankful? Paul wrote, "**I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world**" (Romans 1:8). Paul could've spent his days filled with remorse for his past life when he persecuted the church. He could've been jealous of other Christians who had enjoyed a straighter path to Christ than he had. He could've moaned and groaned about the persecution and sleepless nights he had experienced as an evangelist. But he did none of these things. Rather, he gave thanks for the faith of his brothers and sisters in Rome.

Thankfulness: It's an attitude of the heart which infects the mind, which changes how we live, how we talk, and how we carry ourselves. Thankfulness. That's what changed me. I got sick and tired of being sick and tired, and I asked God to forgive me for my thankless attitude. And his light shown all around: He showed me how much I had to be thankful for, especially his everlasting love through his son, Jesus. Some people say, "Let go and let God." I like that. Relinquishing our lives into the hands of the Lord is the first step to a life of thankfulness.

When Paul wrote that the faith of the believers in Rome was "**being proclaimed throughout the whole world**," he was saying that the Christians AND the pagans in other cities had heard about their faith. Now when a group's reputation becomes a matter of national or even international news it's because they are living in a new way, a way distinct from what is considered normal. Indeed, the lives of the people in the church in Rome had been transformed by their faith, and they had become famous for their love, for their joy, and for their good works.

What would the church look like today if Christians' lives reflected their faith?! Paul wrote, "**I serve (God) in my spirit**" (Romans 1:9). That means he served the Lord with his whole being, which he invites us to do later on when he writes, "**Give your bodies as a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God,... and do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind**" (Romans 12:1-2).

What would the church look like today if Christians' lives reflected their faith? It would look like the church to whom Paul wrote this letter: a people who had devoted their thoughts, words, and deeds to fulfilling the call of God.

Paul wrote, "**I long to see you so that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established**" (Romans 1:11). In chapter 12 he lists 7-gifts: prophesy, service, and teaching; exhortation and giving; leadership and mercy. Was it one of these gifts he wanted to impart to the church? Was it another gift? We don't know. But what we do know is that he saw a need which he wanted to fill with a gift from God, that the church would prosper, he writes, "**that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other's faith, both yours and mine**" (Romans 1:12). The whole point was that in the end, together, as a single body, the church in Rome, and Paul, and the other churches

which had been infected by the stories of the power of the faith of God's people in Rome would all be united in Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters, what would the church of God look like if Christians' lives reflected their faith, their singleness of heart and mind, devoted to Jesus who saved us from sin, death, and the devil? What if together we all gave thanks for God's goodness and love?

This is our calling, to be that church. St. Peter wrote that we are **"living stones, being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ"** (1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2:5).

This week let us strive to live and work in such a way that our faith will be proclaimed throughout Whittier if not the **"whole world"**!

This week let us pray for renewal in our own hearts and minds that the Lord would make his call on our lives real to us.

And this week let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.