

The word “ashamed” jumps right out for some. It did for me the first time I read these words. Paul uses the word “ashamed.” He is not ashamed of the gospel. He believes it is the power of God for salvation for all who believe, for the Jew first and then the Greek...that is for anybody. I remember thinking, “Why would anyone be ashamed of the gospel?” Then I remembered I have been ashamed of church. I have been ashamed of parents who took me to church and Sunday school. I have been ashamed of church when I did not understand it and believe its message. When I first read these words, I had a conversation with myself. It helped me realize why Paul says this. He is writing to people who need to be encouraged. Some believe he is writing to a people he does not know. Some believe he is writing in hopes of establishing another center for mission into another part of the Mediterranean world. He composes a letter that contains the most elaborate explanation of the good news of Jesus Christ. He speaks with conviction. He writes from his own life experience the gospel of Jesus Christ is God’s power for delivering anyone from chaos and hell to reconciliation and heaven.

I say this because I want to try and share something of this gospel one final time. Next Sunday, I will focus on saying “thank you.” This Sunday, I want to share good news. We are here to be people who experience this power to save. We are here to grow in our own conviction about God’s good news in Jesus Christ.

In the early 1950s, Hanover Presbytery was faced with a challenge. Church leaders believed these veterans from World War II who had come home from Europe and the Pacific needed to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. They needed someone who believed it to bring others to know Jesus Christ and live by his good news. This is exactly what Bill Wilson did. Talk to these charter members, they will tell stories of encounter with a young pastor who had convictions. He believed this good news is God’s power to save anyone. For that matter anywhere in the world to this day, the church still thrives where people believe this gospel. The church thrives where people are growing in their conviction that the good news of Christ is God’s power for those worried about serious wrongdoing, or those trying to deal with pain, or standing up to temptation, figuring out why to keep on living, or knowing what to do about being alone. I want to try and share what the gospel has for anyone who needs to be saved.

There are several verses, small portions of this letter that suggest this power. For example, Paul explains in chapter 2, “a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart---it is spiritual and not literal.” (Romans 2:29) The power of God for salvation changes us on the inside; God changes our worldview, our imagination, our sense of what is important.

Paul writes in chapter 3, “For there is no distinction since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 3:24-25) There is power in realizing everyone has fallen short of God’s expectations. There is power in knowing we are made right with God by a gift.

He says in chapter 4 our faith matters. “Therefore (Abraham’s) faith was reckoned to him as righteousness.” (Romans 4:22) “It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.” (Romans 4:24) There is power in this gift of faith. We discover the power of God when we seek it and ask for it.

Paul writes in chapter 5, "Therefore, since we are justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 5:1) There is power in knowing a certain peace with Almighty God. There is power in believing we have been forgiven, power in being made right with ourselves.

He writes in chapter 7, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." He then says, "Wretched man that I am! Who will save me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:19, 24-25) There is power in this kind of admission and struggle. There is power in the faith to believe Jesus Christ will deliver him and us.

We can hear in these short verses the struggle that an apostle communicates in his understanding the power of God in Jesus Christ. Perhaps, one of the most encouraging chapters comes as he has time to consider all that he has written. Chapter 8 becomes a kind of doxology, a hymn of praise to God. He writes, "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor power, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39) There is power in believing God never takes his love away. No matter what happens to any of us, Paul is saying, nothing ever separates us from God's love. God is always there.

Paul must have relied on such a conviction. As a former Pharisee it is likely he would have had a wife and even a family. Yet there is no mention of a spouse in his letters. As an apostle to the Gentile world, he spends many months away from the church which commissions him. What could have happened to his spouse and family? There is nothing anywhere about this. There are times he suffers from an indescribable physical affliction. There are accounts of time he is beaten and tortured and imprisoned. He is misunderstood by the church. He is finally arrested in Jerusalem. It seems that his journey eventually ends in his being beheaded outside of Rome at a place called Three Taverns. Or perhaps this is where his journey begins, really begins.

Here is a life of one Jew named Saul from Tarsus. Here is his testimony as he takes on the Gentile name Paul. He becomes another person because of Jesus Christ. He directs his ministry to sharing God's love in a world dominated by Roman power. He writes this letter to Christians who live in the city of the emperors who were crazy with power. He explains real power as something that is inward. It is something that addresses us all even though we do wrong. Real power is a matter of God making us right as we come to understand who we believe Jesus to be. Real power comes in finding peace not with powerful people but with God. Even then, we are not overpowered by this peace. We struggle to do right. Jesus Christ rescues us from our struggle. Jesus Christ hears us and receives us and forgives us when we ask. In this journey, God never leaves us. Nothing we ever do, nothing we experience, nothing that will ever happen to us can separate us from God's love.

I hope you hear Paul's invitation with this letter. If you do not hear it and you need this deliverance, I hope you will read this letter. Better yet, I hope you will create a Sunday school class or a Bible study and join other people who also want to dig out of these words, the power of God to save anybody. There was a time in my life I was ashamed of the good news of the church, of Jesus Christ. You know I know hold this as a part of my life. This gospel is God's power to save anybody. When I was in college, I was not a candidate for hearing this good news. Yet there were those in my world who were convinced of God's love

and power to save even me. If God can reach down and keep rescuing me, God can keep doing the same for you.

I hope like me you are on your way to becoming convinced of this reality. I pray you are open enough; I hope you are willing to consider the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ. It will take you to places and people you would have never imagined you would go. It will encourage you to do things you never thought possible. No matter what happens, God will be right there with you helping you believe moving you forward.

Almighty God, we are grateful today for this church and for people like Bill Wilson and so many others who have drawn strength from an ancient apostle of the church. Today, we are grateful for Paul and his letter to the church in Rome. Lord, we live in a time empowered by many things. Help us as a congregation to discover again your power saving us in Jesus Christ. We pray today for people here affected by serious wrongdoing, for those who struggle with physical and psychological pain in their lives. We pray for those who are here today hoping to find help with some particular temptation. Give them what they need as a gift of faith. We pray for those who are ready to give up. We pray for those who feel so desperately alone. Help them to experience your Presence always. Bring to conviction all who struggle with the claims of these truths today. Enable us all to realize that the good news of this church and every church is your power to save anyone of us. Hear us now as we pray, "Our Father who art in heaven..."