

**THE GOSPEL OF GOD
Romans 1:1-15**

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Today we begin a new sermon series from Paul's letter to the church in the capital city of Rome. Last week we finished a sermon series from Luke's Gospel. As we go through the series, I want to urge you to try to listen each week, as one sermon builds upon the other. Each sermon will stand alone in a meaningful way, but together they build a comprehensive collage of Paul's thinking regarding the Jesus event.

From time to time, scientists have sent space probes to Mars. The object of the exercise is of course to find out more about the great planet which, although it's our nearest neighbour, is still over a hundred million miles away. For centuries people have imagined that there might be life on Mars, perhaps intelligent life. There are undoubtedly many new things to be learned, to be discovered. If only we could get there safely and work out what was going on.

A lot of people feel like that about St. Paul in general, and Romans in particular. Most people who have at least a nodding acquaintance with the Christian faith are aware that Paul was a striking and important figure in the church's early days. Many know that Romans is his greatest letter. Some may even have heard of the powerful effect this letter has had, over and over again, in the history of the church. But to many Christians, Romans remains as much of a mystery as Mars." I tried to read it once," they say, like a scientist describing yet another failed space probe, "but I got bogged down and I couldn't work it out." (Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone, Romans, Part 1*, p. 1)

Well, let's take this trip to Paul's planet of Romans together.

I can say without exaggeration that Romans has had a greater influence upon the church than any other letter written by any other person. In fact, Augustine of Hippo was converted through reading a passage from the letter to the church at Rome. Thus began a great period of importance for the church.

The framer of the Reformation – Martin Luther – found an unleashing of a new spiritual life, as a renewed understanding of Romans pricked his heart. Luther described Romans this way: "This epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament, and is truly the purest gospel. It is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but also that he should occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul."

John Wesley was converted by reading Luther's introduction to the book of Romans. Karl Barth changes everything away from sterile liberalism back toward biblical theology when he got interested in Romans.

Romans is a lengthy letter. We won't study every word and every verse, but we will offer you a comprehensive understanding of the thought and the movement of this great, lengthy epistle.

Let me give you some comparisons. Cicero wrote 796 letters. They averaged 295 words. Seneca's 124 letters averaged 995 words. Paul's thirteen letters in the New Testament average about 1,300 words. And Romans, his longest letter, is comprised of 7,100 words. The length of this letter makes it one of the most remarkable works in all of antiquity – an unusual letter, indeed.

The letter is written by Paul. No one doubts that. At this time, Paul had been in the ministry for about twenty-five years. He was no fresh graduate from the seminary about to pastor his first church. He was a seasoned churchman, a veteran theologian, who had pondered all the great messages of the faith.

But Paul had never been to Rome. He had never visited those to whom he was writing. We're not even sure where this church found its beginning. But we do know that Paul has long desired to visit them (15:24) and, by the time he writes the letter, there is already an established church in this, the capital city.

The church might have been founded this way: Peter is preaching in Acts 2, and folks were visiting Jerusalem from all over the Roman Empire. A marketer, a merchant, finds Christ in his heart – and all roads lead to Rome for the businessman. He eventually carries back the gospel, even as he carries back his wares. Through travel and trade, a church is born.

The Roman Christians didn't meet together as one large gathering, but in a number of different house churches distributed throughout the various quarters of the city. Paul greets five separate households throughout the letter, and there may have even been more.

Roman historian Suetonius says that the Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome because they were constantly making disturbance over a one Chrestus. Most scholars believe Chrestus is equivalent to Christus, who is equivalent to the Christ. If Suetonius is giving us a hint, then we have a large group of Jews in Rome – some who accept Jesus as the Messiah, some who do not. And there are disturbing disputes between those who accept Jesus and those who are refuse Him. Thus, Claudius kicks the bickering Jews out of the capital. In Acts 18:2, we read about Aquilla and Priscilla, the tent makers, having to leave Italy – that would be Rome – because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to get out of Rome. This happened in about A.D. 49. So, the first believers in the city of Rome were Jews. They come into contention with the Jews who reject Jesus as Messiah. And it's not long until the Gentiles – and I mean a lot of Gentiles in Rome – began to call Jesus "Lord," as well.

Paul writes the letter from the city of Corinth around A.D. 55. He wanted to visit the church in Rome. He's on his way to Spain, but, first, he's going to Jerusalem with an offering for Jews who

are suffering from poverty. Then to Rome, and then to Spain – at least, those were his plans. A new mission to Spain.

Paul usually writes his letter in lieu of a visit after he's been with a church or established a church. But, he didn't start the church in Rome. He's never even visited the church. In fact, he writes this letter to prepare to visit the church in Rome. In fact, three times he says that he hopes to come to Rome (1:10, 11, 13). It is most likely he is writing Rome to formally introduce himself, to explain his gospel, and to set them up as his western base for his carrying the gospel beyond Rome to Spain. Unlike the Corinthian letter, he's not solving problems within the church at Rome – they weren't his problems to solve at this point; he wasn't their spiritual father nor founder. Rather, he is giving them his theological resume – “This is what I believe...” – in order that they would support, both prayerfully and financially, his mission further west to Spain. (Garland, p. 23).

Let's begin.

V. 1

Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.

Now, when we write letters, we don't begin by giving the name of the writer. We begin by giving the name of the recipient: “Dear John.” John can be our best friend, or he can be our worst enemy, but we always start the letter with “dear.” Kind of an odd custom, if you ask me. “Dearest John.” In antiquity, however, the letters began logically with the name of the sender – Paul – the first word that flows from the pen.

Now Paul would not do well in a contemporary composition class because he wrote the longest run-on sentences that you can possibly imagine. Oh, they are correctly constructed, but diagramming these sentences is a nightmare. Verses 1-7, in the Greek text, are one sentence.

Paul comes from the Latin *paulus*, meaning “little.” It may be a name like Shorty in our day. In fact, there is some indication, to be sure, that Paul was small in stature (2 Corinthians 10:1, 10). His original name, Saul, is, of course, taken from the name of Israel's first king.

Paul describes himself as a bond-servant of Christ Jesus. This is lofty language. It's a harsh word – it really means slave. But it's used in terms of Abraham (Genesis 26:24), Moses (Joshua 1:2), and the prophet Amos (Amos 3:7) as servants of God. Paul might be making the insinuation that he stands in the great line of the prophetic voices of ancient Israel. Like Abraham, like Moses, like Amos – he is a slave of the Divine. Notice that while the Old Testament prophets were called a “slave of God,” he calls himself a “slave of Christ Jesus,” putting Jesus in the highest possible position.

It is estimated that one in five persons in Rome at the time were slaves. They were all too familiar with the concept of slavery. They knew what it meant to be “wholly owned by one,” and Paul wants them to know he is wholly owned by the Messiah Jesus. By the way, the Messiah himself took on the form of a slave, Paul tells us in Philippians, and died a slave's death on the cross. (Garland, 64) “I, Paul” – or “I, Shorty” – “am a slave of Messiah Jesus.” Christ means Messiah, anointed one. Jesus means Savior.

Paul's also called to be an apostle. An apostle means "messenger, one who is sent" – a special office, one appointed by God. The idea of divine call is so important to Paul, showing the priority of the divine. It is a call from on high which Paul has answered. Paul was not self-chosen. He was minding his own business as a loyal Pharisee when the risen Christ interrupted his life and called him into apostleship. As an apostle, Paul had been set apart for the gospel of God.

The word "gospel" frames this letter. It appears three times in this opening and three times in the closing (15:13-16:27), six out of the nine occurrences in this letter. Like bookends, the gospel – the Good News – frames this letter. The gospel proclaims what God has done in keeping the promises to Israel and raising Jesus from the domain of the dead. And this letter unfolds the gospel's implications for Gentiles, too. (Garland, p. 62)

That's an interesting way to describe the gospel. Sometimes he calls it "the gospel of his Son" (v. 9). Sometimes, "the gospel of Christ." But in Romans 1:1, it is the "good news of God." When he says it's the "good news of God," he's giving us the ultimate source. God is the source of all good news, especially the source of the good news of the crucifixion and resurrection of His Son. "God" is the most important word in the book of Romans.

Paul refers to God 153 times. This book is fundamentally about God.

I'm glad we're pondering the book of Romans for our Sunday morning series. I'm glad because sometimes, in all of our speaking and teaching about Jesus and the Holy Spirit, sometimes we leave out God Himself. At the end of the day, the Jesus story is all about God, the Creator and the Redeemer and the Sustainer of His people. The story of Jesus is a story of good news from God. We cannot understand what Romans is going to tell us about righteousness and justification if we do not understand God and His nature. What is God like? He's a God of good news.

This good news, however, is not some new idea. Look at verse 2. It's a good news "He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures." The gospel, the good news, the story of Jesus is God's unchanging purpose – always and everywhere – for His people. Now this promise was not given *by* His prophets, but *through* His prophets. The promise is given by God. The very story of Jesus is the fulfillment of all that God had said and spoken and done through the prophets of old. The story of Jesus is part of the story of God's eternal workings with His people.

And while it is the gospel of God (verse 3), it does concern His Son. His Son is a descendant of David. The prophets of old had told us that Messiah would be a descendant of David (Isaiah 11:1, 10; Jeremiah 23:5-6; Ezekiel 34:23-24).

Fancy writing like this to Rome of all places, the greatest city of the world at the time, the home of the most powerful man in the world, the Caesar, whose official titles included "son of god," whose birthday was hailed as "good news," and who claimed the allegiance, the loyalty, of the greatest empire the world had ever seen! But Paul knows exactly what he is doing. Jesus is the *true* king, the world's rightful Lord, and it is vital that the Christians in Rome itself know this and live by it.

In fact, what Paul says about Jesus in this passage, especially verses 3 and 4, seems almost designed to stake a claim which puts that of Caesar in the shade. Jesus is the true “son of God.” He comes from a royal house far older than anything Rome can claim: that of David, a thousand years before. His resurrection, which Paul sees not as a strange freak or bizarre miracle but as the beginning of “the resurrection of the dead” for which most Jews had been longing, is the sign of a power which trumps that of tyrants and bullies the world over. Death is their final weapon, and he has broken it. (Tom Wright, p. 3-4)

Verse 4 is a powerful statement. Jesus was “declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead.”

I want you to notice something you might not have picked up on before. “The resurrection from the dead.” How is that term used in the New Testament? It doesn’t really point to the resurrection of a single person – say, the empty tomb of Jesus. The resurrection from the dead refers to the general resurrection at the last day of God’s people (see Matthew 22:31; Luke 20:35; Acts 17:32; 23:6; 24:21; 1 Corinthians 15:12, 13, 21, 42; Hebrews 6:2). The resurrection of Christ is not about a solitary empty tomb. The resurrection of Christ is about the beginning of the age of the resurrection of all the faithful of God.

Then he gives us the full title “Christ Jesus our *Kurios*, our Lord.” Paul loves the term Lord in regard to Jesus. It is a word used of Yahweh of the Old Testament. “Jesus is Lord” was the most profound statement of the early church. In fact, Paul said, “If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9).

We find this key confession not only in Paul’s letter to the church at Rome but also in his letter to the church in the city of Corinth. When Paul wrote, “No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3b), he was affirming that “Jesus is Lord” is the most basic confession of Christian fellowship. In Philippians, Paul envisioned a day when every member of the human race, both the living and the dead, would bow the knee to Jesus, a day when “every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Philippians 2:11).

Through Jesus we receive grace (verse 5). Grace means something unearned, unmerited. God’s favor given because of the crucifixion of Jesus. I want you to notice something, however. Grace is never given for personal enjoyment alone. It is always given as a commission and a call for the kingdom of God. In Paul’s case, it was a grace and call to apostleship to lead Gentiles into the kingdom. Being a Pharisee, a Hebrew of Hebrews, that was a radical call for Paul. A call from God – and Paul answered.

The “good news” is not, first and foremost, about something that can happen to us. What happens to us through the “gospel” is indeed dramatic and exciting: God’s good news...transforms our lives and our hopes like nothing else. But the “good news” which Paul announces is primarily good news about something that has [already] happened, events through which the world is now a different place. It is about what God has done in Jesus, the Messiah, Israel’s true king, the world’s true Lord. (Tom Wright, p. 4)

In verse 7, he calls them “saints.” It’s a New Testament word used for believers in general. It means to be separated, to be set apart. It is not so much being separated away from something, but separated to something. As men and women of the gospel, we are separated to God.

I want you to understand that “saint” is really a plural term. We might speak of Saint Peter or Saint Mary, but that’s not the New Testament usage. In fact, in the New Testament, the word is not used for any individual believer. It is always used, in plural, of all believers. We are together – not individually – a community set apart to God. We are saints together. We are saints not because of high moral achievement – that’s a modern use – but because we belong to God.

Notice verse 7. Not only do they get grace, but they also get peace. Grace is God’s response to sin through Christ that results in peace between God and reconciled sinners. Rome offered peace at the end of a sword, so to speak. The Romans would plunder, butcher, steal, and make desolate – and then call it “peace.” When Nero came to power at the age of 17, so many were hoping he would bring the long-awaited peace, but it was not to be so. But the gospel offered grace, and that grace leads to true peace. (Garland, p. 71)

After that long sentence (vs. 1-7), Paul next begins his prayer, consisting of verses 8-15. Paul has a prayer in his letters, something of a thanksgiving. We find a thanksgiving in each of his letters except Galatians, because he’s mad at them. He’s disappointed.

When Paul says “first,” he does not mean there is a second. He basically means, “Let me begin.” He begins with a thanksgiving for the believers in Rome. Paul had not yet been to Rome, though he wanted to go there, especially as the apostle to the Gentiles. He prays for them constantly. He never stops. He always makes mention of his fellow believers in Rome. Part of his prayer is that God will allow him to visit with them. He wants to visit them to give them a spiritual gift, to make them strong.

He is thanking God: thanking the maker of heaven and earth that there is a community in Rome, under Caesar’s nose, who give allegiance to Jesus as Lord, who have been grasped by the vision of a different kingdom, a different hope, and who share a different faith. That’s at the centre of it, as we shall see: faith, the belief and trust in the God who raised Jesus from the dead. (Tom Wright, p. 6)

And even as he gave a gift, the traffic wouldn’t be one-way (verse 12). He knows that he, too, would be enriched, mutually encouraged, by their faith.

Paul can do no other. He’s under obligation (v. 14), both to the Greeks and barbarians, to the wise and the foolish. He has been called by God. Paul wants to take the good news of God to the capital city, and he prays for that opportunity.

What do we take away from this? The good news has been foretold by the prophets. The good news is the good news of God – the gospel of God. The good news is that we have the Son-ship of Jesus proclaimed, His Messiahship trumpeted by His glorious resurrection through the power of the Holy Spirit. The good news is that we are all called, we are all set apart as a community – we are set apart to God, that we would be His living community, a community that involves both

Jews and Greeks, wise and foolish, all humanity chosen by God. Paul is getting us ready. He's about to begin the Roman Road of theological reflection. Let's join him.