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The Gospel Story
A Study of the Book of Romans
Romans 1:1-17
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About two thousand years ago the greatest missionary in the history of the church wrote these words, “*I am not ashamed of the gospel.*” Why do you think he wrote that? I can only think of one reason why he wrote that—because there was a serious concern in the first century that the Christians were becoming ashamed of the gospel. There has never been a time when the gospel of Jesus Christ has been popular with contemporary culture. It’d be good to ask ourselves the question, “*Are we ever ashamed of the gospel?*” Of course our first response would be, “No, of course not! We would never be that way!” But it’s always been a problem for the church—a temptation to adjust, alter, edit the message to make it more socially acceptable.

We would say today that the wrath of God is not a very politically correct concept, so maybe we could just explain that away. Sin is certainly not a popular subject, so let’s not talk about sin. Let’s make it about something else. And certainly the concept of hell and an eternal judgment is offensive to this culture. Maybe it’s possible to just explain that away. And little by little we begin to recreate God in our own image. We become God’s image-consultant to make Him more popular in contemporary culture. But this isn’t a new problem. It’s a two thousand-year-old problem. That’s why Paul wrote he’s “*...not ashamed of the gospel*”. It is that concern that led Paul to write what most scholars consider to be his theological masterpiece, as he defines and declares the gospel story. From now, basically, until Easter we’re going to spend our time unpacking this magnificent New Testament book called Romans. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Romans, Chapter 1.

In Romans chapter 1 Paul is most likely writing from Corinth on his third missionary journey. It would make it about AD 57, roughly twenty-five years after his own personal encounter with the gospel story. He’s writing to the most sophisticated, the most significant, the most powerful city in the world. Nero is emperor in Rome. Nero ascribed to himself a number of titles, one of which was “The Son of God”. He declared his birthday to be celebrated as “Good News” and declared himself to be “The Exalted King”. You can then hear the language of Paul as he identifies *the true Son of God*. He identifies the *Good News of God* and he identifies the One who *reigns as King over the universe*. It’s helpful to remember that this message that Paul unpacks for us, this message that he was so passionate about, is the message for which he would ultimately be executed. Verses 1 through 7 are basically one long run-on sentence in the Greek language. And then from verse 8 to verse 15, it’s again one long run-on sentence. It makes it kind of hard to organize, so we’re just kind of going to flow through the verses, because that’s basically how it’s written. Verse 1:

Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, (*NASB, Romans 1:1)

Paul identifies himself as the writer, identifies himself as a **bond-servant**—I think better translated *bond-slave*; that’s actually the Greek word—and I think in our minds it has a little bit different imagery. He is saying, “I’m a slave of Jesus Christ. He’s the Master. I’m the slave.” It’s a statement of his humility. But then he says he’s **...called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God**. An apostle was a *sent one*, somebody sent with a mission, representing not his own message but the message of the master. And in this case it’s the gospel—the good news of God.

Now throughout the book of Romans, as we talk about the gospel, it's important to remind ourselves we're not limiting this to just the "1-2-3; here's-how-you-get-saved"—what we might refer to as the plan of salvation. But the gospel is the *gospel story* and so, throughout Romans, I'm going to refer to it as the gospel story, because it's Genesis to Revelation. It includes us but it's not limited to us. It is the gospel story that redeems all creation back—with that great crescendo in Romans, Chapter 8. Paul's *humility* is reflected in his being a **bond-slave**, but his *authority* is reflected in his being an **apostle**. It's also important to remind ourselves that Paul is not sharing his opinion. His voice is not one voice among many. Sometimes when I hear people talk about the Bible, they'll say, "Well, that was just Paul's opinion." That is a fundamental mistake; that's a basic mistake and a misunderstanding of the Scriptures. From Genesis to Revelation the Bible itself claims to be the God-breathed Word of God. Paul was not sharing his opinion. He didn't have that right. He's a slave; he's an apostle. He is sharing the words of the Master—it's the message of the Master. Jesus went so far as to say, "Even every jot and tittle"—every punctuation mark—is exactly what God wanted. So as we go through the book of Romans, I don't want us to say, "Well, that's just Paul's opinion." That is incorrect. This is God Himself defining His gospel and we will approach it that way. Verse 2:

... (this gospel) which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord, (Vs. 2-4)

Paul reminds us this is not a new story. The story of the Messiah did not start with Christmas. It started in Genesis, Chapter 3. Literally moments after Adam and Eve chose the path of sin, God made a promise that someday He would do something to bring life back out of death. It's the story that has been unfolding throughout the Scriptures and that's what Paul says. It's the *gospel story*. He talks about Jesus Christ—that's who the story is about—**who was born of a descendant of David in the flesh**, referring to His humanity. Jesus was born as a man in the kingly line of David, fulfilling the covenant that God had made to David. He was a legal heir to the throne. But He was also **declared to be the Son of God**, and that declaration came with great **power through the resurrection from the dead**. So it's important to understand those two terms: He was *born a man*; He was *declared to be God*. He has eternally been God but, at a point in time, He became man. Born a man, declared to be God, and that declaration came with great power as He rose from the dead, conquering death once and for all. Some scholars, and I think rightfully so, also see in this terminology the emphasis of Jesus in His humanity, which would be His humility before the cross. But then, as a result of Him completing His mission and conquering death, He is exalted as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. So it's a declaration of both His *humility* and His *exaltation*. Sometimes I think we as Christians get Him stuck in His humility, and we fail to advance our theology to the resurrected, exalted Christ, who is the Christ that will return—the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Verse 5:

...through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles, for His name's sake, among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ; (Vs. 5-6)

It's very helpful to notice that he says the result of this message, of this gospel, is **to bring about obedience of faith**. Basically what that phrase means is that obedience flows out of a faith that saves. There would be those critics of the Bible that would say, "Paul is in conflict with the New Testament book of James. James talks about a faith that works and Paul talks about a faith without

works.” But they’re not in conflict at all. As a matter of fact they’re perfectly in sync, and this is a reminder of that. Paul is saying, “A faith that saves is a faith that works,” *and the outflow of such faith is obedience.*

It’s very important to remember that we should never expect regenerate behavior from unregenerate people. Stop being so frustrated with the people you work with and the people you go to school with and the people that live next door because they don’t live like a Christian. If they’re not a Christian, we shouldn’t expect that! Obedience flows out of faith, and it’s a reminder that unless people *change from the inside out*, they never really change. So the message of the gospel is what ultimately brings about life-change—obedience—for whom? For **the Gentiles**—that’s the New Testament way of saying: for the nations, for the world, for everybody. Why would that happen? He says, **For His name’s sake**, in other words *for His glory, to exalt His reputation as God.*
Verse 7:

...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.

So the recipients are the believers in Rome. Paul often uses the couplet *grace and peace*. It’s good to always remind ourselves that there is no possibility of *peace* without a strong theology of *grace*. That’s why Paul puts those two together so often. You’ll never know peace until you understand the ramifications of grace. Now verses 1 through 7 are the longest introduction in any of Paul’s letters, and he basically establishes a foundation upon which he will build for the remaining chapters of the book. So let me see if I can give you a simple review or summary of these verses:

Paul, as a slave of Jesus Christ, as an apostle, has come to declare the gospel story of God. What is the gospel story of God? It’s the story about Jesus Christ, God’s Son, according to the Scriptures, for the nations, to bring about obedience for God’s glory.

That’s the summary of verses 1 through 7. Let me say it again:

The gospel story is about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, according to the Scriptures, for the nations to bring about obedience for God’s glory.

Everything that follows will unpack that. Verse 8:

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world. 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, always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established; 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. 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. I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. (Vs. 8-15)

As I mentioned before, that is one long, run-on sentence in Greek and, when you read it, it just feels that way; it just kind of flows. Now it's not a complicated paragraph; most of it is pretty straightforward. I just want to make two comments. Number one, I do believe that paragraph sets the tone, the emotional tone for the book of Romans. What I mean by that is it reveals Paul's pastoral heart. I think it's always helpful to remember that the greatest theologian in the history of the church was a pastor, and he very much had a pastor's heart. This is not a theological exercise in a seminary classroom so you get it right on the test. This is not dissecting a bunch of intense theology so we make sure we're right! Paul has a passion and a compassion for these people. He loves them; he's a shepherd to them. He longs to be with them but he knows: by imparting the truth, it is the truth that sets them free. It's the truth that gives them life; it's the truth that matters. So we're going to seek to maintain that tone throughout the book of Romans. I don't want it to become academic. I want it to have this pastoral tone, where we understand this is what changes life! This is what gives meaning to life, because that's very much Paul's heart.

Second of all I think it's worth noting in verse 14 that he says he's **under obligation**. He's a debtor to God who has sent him on this mission to take the message to the Jews—they're the recipients—but also to the Greeks and also to the barbarians. Basically if you're a Jew, the rest of the world are Greeks, or Gentiles. If you are a Greek, the rest of the world are barbarians. He's just using first century language to say: every nation...every people...everyone. Rich, poor, wise, foolish, it doesn't matter. He feels an obligation, not just to get something *said*, but to get something *heard*. Paul was the master of that. Go back and read the book of Acts and look at how Paul continually adjusted his methods to fit the particular city and culture he was in. In our mission statement we say...*seeking to present every person complete in Christ*. That's what Paul is saying. He feels the burden that Jesus died for every person; Jesus loves every person. There's this debt he owes to God: that makes sure—with kindness, with compassion, with truth—that everyone hears the message. So I think this is something that's very much worth thinking about. Think about it this way: Anything that I do, anything that I say that creates a roadblock, creates a barrier that makes it less likely that anyone in our culture is going to listen to the life-changing message of Jesus, is offensive to God. It's very important to understand: this debt—this stewardship we have to be carriers of the gospel—must come before business. It must come before politics. It must come before personal agendas. I must be willing, with kindness and gentleness and patience and compassion, to reach out equally to the right-wing Republican and the left-wing Democrat—which frankly, God is neither—with the same kindness and compassion and patience to the rich and to the poor, to the selfish and to the hurting, to the religious good person and the grossly evil person. We need to think about what Paul is saying here; that must be most important for us as the church, as we steward the gospel. Verse 16:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, (why?) for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes,

Paul says, **“I am not ashamed of the gospel.”** You remember it was Paul who wrote to the Corinthians and said, “The message of the gospel is foolishness to those who are perishing.” It's never been popular with contemporary culture. Rome was a sophisticated city, full of money, full of intellectuals, full of philosophy, and there must have been a tendency for the Roman Christians to begin to alter the gospel, because in some way they were ashamed of its message. Paul says, “I am not ashamed.” Why? **For it is the power**—that's a translation of the Greek word from which we get our word *dynamite*—it's *explosive power*. For what? **For salvation!** The word salvation is not limited to a ticket to heaven. It's actually a word that means wholeness, fullness. It's the idea of reconciliation; it's the idea of restoration; it's the idea of something that satisfies that longing in my

soul. It's everything I've been longing for. That's salvation! I would suggest to you that every single person you work with, every person you go to school with, every person that lives next door, every person in your family, every person that irritates you every day has one thing in common: deep within their souls there is a longing for something that will quiet the storm, something that will satisfy, something that will ultimately give life to living. "Tell me that's out there somewhere!" So we chase it with money. We chase it with success. We chase it with pleasure. We chase it with popularity. We hide from it with addictions. Our culture is full of all the symptoms of a culture that is dissatisfied and looking for something. What Paul is saying is: the only something that will bring wholeness to people's shattered souls is the life-changing power, the explosive power of the gospel. That's why it cannot be altered; it cannot be compromised, and we should never be ashamed that we steward the message that gives people life.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone (to everyone!) who believes, (freely offered to all, but made available to those who believe) to the Jew first (meaning chronologically—the story comes through the Jewish people) and also to the Greek (to the nations). Verse 17:

For in it... (In what? In the gospel of God) **For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith;**

Now the phrase **faith to faith** means *down through the years*. So from Genesis on, the righteousness of God has been revealed. What does that mean? The best way to understand that phrase is to think of a two-sided coin, and you have to understand both sides of the coin are related to the righteousness of God. One side of the coin is saying that *God is righteous*. God is the standard, perfect in His righteousness. The whole reason there is a story of redemption is because God is righteous. God cannot just say, "Hey, I know we've messed up the world, but let's all be friends, and let's just come on in and have a party." He can't do that. He is righteous. He is the standard. He is just.

In our relativistic culture, whenever someone brings up the discussion about teaching morality, someone usually says, "Whose morality will we teach?" Because in a relativistic culture, it's all up for grabs. The relativist has no answer. So every man does *that which is right in his own eyes*. But for us as the people of God, that's a very simple question. We shouldn't hesitate for a moment. We're not called to be politically correct. We're called to speak the truth and the answer is, "That's a very simple question. It's the morality of God." God doesn't just *do* right; *God is* right. He's the standard. He is the standard by which all else is measured—and it isn't really up for grabs. And so He is *right* and He is the *standard* but, if that's the only side of the coin that gets proclaimed, that's not good news! Frankly, that's bad news. It's ridiculous to think, at the end of the day, if I have more good works than bad works, that somehow reaches God's standard of righteousness. Of course it doesn't! It's also silly to think a bunch of religious activity somehow makes me measure up to God's standard. Of course it doesn't. I'm not even close—I'm not even in the ball game! So if that's all there is to the righteousness of God, this would be a very sad story.

But part of the righteousness of God, if you want to put it that way, is God's compelling compassion to do what is necessary to make sinful people right again. That's what he means when he says, "This is what the whole story has been about—**from faith to faith**—it's about God's righteousness, His rightness, compelling Him out of His love to find a way to make sinful people right in the presence of God—that the Judge could be the Justifier. In the words of the great old hymn, it would be "*love and sorrow mingled together on the cross*". As on that cross, God is both

Judge and Justifier—two sides of the same coin, two sides of God’s righteousness, which is what makes the story *good news*, that even though God is righteous, His rightness caused Him to unfold a plan by which sinful people could be just, declared legally righteous in His presence forever. And then he quotes the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk:

“But the righteous man shall live by faith.” (Vs. 17b)

The righteous man—some translations have *the just man*—**shall live by faith.** What he’s saying is that it’s by faith that we are made righteous. In other words, God’s unfolding plan would be God Himself doing what is necessary to make us right. We believe—by faith we believe—and on the basis of that we are made right. And having been made right, we live. The only way to quiet the storm, the only way to find forgiveness, the only way to stand right with a righteous God is to believe that He did for us what we could never do for ourselves. And *by faith* I believe that, and it’s through that faith He makes me righteous and I live. I find what my soul has been longing for.

In the 1500’s, there was a brilliant law student who had a promising future. He just had one problem. He was terrified of God—he was terrified of the righteousness of God! He was terrified of the holiness of God, to the point where he couldn’t function. So he left law school and he joined a monastery, hoping there to find relief for his tormented soul. But he didn’t find relief for his tormented soul. The priests would talk about when he would come into the confessional, they would groan because he would spend six and eight hours a day in the confessional, confessing every possible thing that he ever could have done wrong, because he was tormented about the idea that someday he would stand before a holy, righteous God. He recognized the foolishness of thinking a bunch of religious stuff somehow makes me acceptable to a righteous God. That’s not possible! And about the time he thought there was no relief for his torment—he was mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually coming unraveled—until he read Romans, Chapter 1, Verse 17. His name: Martin Luther. It was Romans 1:17 that unlocked the theology of Romans for Martin Luther when he, for the first time, realized the only way to be made righteous is by faith and believing that God, as the just God, is also the Justifier and that He made a way of salvation, and through faith he could be made righteous and find relief for his tormented soul. That theology changed Martin Luther’s life. That theology changed the world and that theology continues to change the world today. That’s why we, together, as The Church of Jesus Christ must say, **“I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the explosive power of God for salvation.”**

Our Father, we’re thankful that when we were desperately lost in our sin, You were already busy about a plan that would bring redemption, that would bring relief, that would bring forgiveness, that would bring wholeness, that we could find life. Lord, I pray that You would give us gifted minds in the weeks to come, gifted minds and soft hearts to understand the wonder of the gospel story in a new and fresh way. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

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