

April 27/28, 2013

The Gospel Story: In Review

Romans 1-16

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If you're visiting with us this morning, since September we've been systematically working our way through the book of Romans and so this morning we're going to try and summarize all sixteen chapters. Now there's just no way that we can open up our Bibles and dig into each of those sixteen chapters in the time allotted, so we're going to do this a little bit differently. Basically I'm just going to try to connect the dots from beginning to end and capture Paul's argument. We're going to try to do that through a question and answer format. Now, obviously, I have scripted the questions in order to get to the argument of each section of Romans, but just to break up the monotony a little bit, we had different people ask the questions. We'll do it through the videos and we'll see how this works. So let's get started:

"I hear the term 'gospel' used in so many ways. It's confusing. What exactly is the gospel?"

The gospel literally means the *good news*. In the Bible the term *gospel* is used to represent the story from Genesis to Revelation. It is the story of what God was willing to do to make a way for sinful men and women to have a relationship with a holy God and to spend forever with Him in paradise. In this series I used the phrase, **The Gospel Story**, in order to remind us that the gospel is much more than just the three or four or five points that we think of as *the plan of salvation*. In Romans chapter 1, Paul says, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of God, for it is the power of God unto salvation."

"Okay, so if the gospel story is the 'good news', then what's the bad news?"

Yes, the bad news is actually really bad! In Romans chapter 1, we're reminded that God created us in His image in order to enjoy a relationship with Him in a place called *Paradise* forever. But we thought we had a better plan. We decided to be our own gods, to make our own way, to try and satisfy our own souls, and to meet our own needs. And so we rebelled against God, and the world—such as it is today—is the result of that choice. A lot of people, when they look at the struggles and the pain and the suffering in the world today, they want to blame God. But this world isn't what God wanted. God wanted paradise for us. This is the consequence of the choice to rebel against God. As a matter of fact, three times in Romans chapter 1, we see the phrase, "*God turned them over to...*" which basically means: because God loves us, He allowed us to make our choices, but we live with the consequences. I suppose God could have been some sort of a dictator and forced us to submit. But because God is loving, He let us choose, but we live with the consequences of those choices. We might say that part of the judgment of God is that we live with the consequences of those choices that we have made.

Romans chapter 1 reminds us that God is a God of wrath. A lot of people in our culture struggle with that concept. They want to believe that God is a God of love but He has no wrath—but that doesn't even make sense logically. It is precisely because God is a God of love, that God has wrath. When God has seen everything that He loves, used and abused and destroyed, it makes Him angry. That is God's wrath! And Romans chapter 1 says every single one of us is under God's wrath.

“I can see why all the really bad people are in trouble with God, but what about all the really good people?”

That’s a question I actually hear quite often. So let’s start with some definitions. How are we defining the term, ‘good’? In other words, what is the standard of measure? One of the things that is true of our culture today is that people don’t think the *Good News* is all that good because they’ve convinced themselves that the bad news isn’t all that bad—and we’ve done that by changing the standard of measure. Things like relativism—this idea that there are no moral absolutes—are basically evidence of our attempt to change the standard. We’ve convinced ourselves that *we’re* the standard and so we just measure ourselves up against other people’s performance. It’s as if God grades on a curve, like when you are in high school math, and so as long as I pick the right people to compare myself to, I can convince myself I’m a good person. It’s the idea if anybody’s going to make it, surely I will make it! But if God grades on a curve, then you would say Jesus was the ultimate curve wrecker because, when God became flesh and entered this world, He displayed the standard, and the standard is the *perfect righteousness of a holy God*. And when we measure ourselves against that standard, nobody measures up. As a matter of fact, nobody even comes close!

“Are you telling me that there are none who are right with God? Not even one?”

First of all, it’s not *me* telling you that. This isn’t *my* opinion. This is God telling you that. It’s a sobering thing to remind us, at the end of the day, there’s only one opinion that matters. We stand before a holy God and it is God, Himself, who says in Romans chapter 3, “There are none righteous, not even one.” Whether you are a Romans 1 rebellious pagan or whether you are a Romans 2 religious moralist, both stand equally condemned before God.

Maybe think of it this way: There are basically two ways to avoid Jesus. One is by being really, really bad; the other is by being really, really good. But, at the end of the day, no one measures up to the standard of a righteous, holy God. Before God, we all stand condemned.

“If that’s true, wow! then is there any hope?”

If that’s the question you have half way through chapter 3 of Romans, you have rightly understood the argument of Romans because, up to that point, it seems very hopeless. But that’s what makes the good news really good—that God has promised to make a way for sinful men and women to have a relationship with a holy God and to spend forever with Him in paradise. The way would be offered freely as a gift to those who believe. Romans chapter 3 tells us that Jesus became the payment for sin. The term Paul uses is the term, *propitiation*. It’s a banking term. It basically means that Jesus absorbed the debt. He paid the debt of our sin in order that God might offer forgiveness freely as a gift.

Now sometimes people ask the question, “Why did anybody have to pay the debt?” In other words, why couldn’t God just forgive? The answer is because the concept “*just forgive*” doesn’t exist in reality. Those are just words. What you’re basically asking is: “Couldn’t God just pretend it didn’t happen?” You can’t pretend it didn’t happen. It *did* happen.

Let me see if I can illustrate that. Think back to what happened a couple of weeks ago in Boston. Based on that, there are a couple of options: The victims—the people of Boston—could get together and could say, “We’ve decided we’re going to absorb the debt of what was done on ourselves. We’re going to offer forgiveness. We’re going to carry the load. We’re going to let the bad guy go free.” That would be an option. Or there’s an option that the bad guy stands before a

court of law and is held accountable for what he did. That would be right; that would be justice. But the one option that's *not* on the table is: we can't pretend that it didn't happen. It *did* happen. So somebody has to absorb the cost of that. In the same way our rebellion, our sin, *did* happen. Therefore somebody has to absorb the debt of that. Somebody has to pay the debt. So Jesus paid the debt. He absorbed the debt of our sin on Himself in order that He could offer forgiveness freely as a gift, in order that we might be justified before a holy God.

Perhaps the most significant term in the book of Romans is the term *justified*. It's a legal term that means *to be declared legally righteous*. God promises, on the basis of what Jesus did for you, that if you believe by faith that God offers to remove the dirty clothes—the sin-stained clothes that define your life—to remove those, and to replace them with a robe of His own righteousness, so that when God looks at you, He no longer sees your sin, but He actually sees His own righteousness. And because the righteousness of God is eternal, you stand eternally righteous in the presence of a holy God. God has offered to declare in the courts of heaven that you are righteous forever!

“For me, religion has always been about fear, about shame, and about guilt. Can you tell me how grace is different from all that?”

Grace is night and day different from all that! Religion is about fear. Religion is about shame; it is about guilt. That's how it functions. Religion is a lot like Santa Claus. “He's making a list. He's checking it twice. He's going to find out who's been naughty or nice.” And the implications of that are: if you've been naughty, you're in trouble. Religion is based on performance. It's about needing religion to get to God. It's about keeping the rules. It's about religious activity. It's religion's way of controlling you. And the performance is about being good enough—but how good is good enough? Was I good enough today? But what about yesterday? And what about tomorrow? And what if I blow it? At the end of the day, there's so much shame; there's so much guilt; there's so much anxiety that hundreds of thousands of people have walked away from religion because they just can't take it.

But what God offers you is radically *other than* that—because it's not based on your performance. It's based on a gift of God's grace—that Jesus has already done the work. Jesus absorbed your debt; Jesus has finished the work. He offers you salvation freely, as a gift. This is so critically important to understand as Christians! The war is over—the pressure is off—the battle has been won! God offers you salvation *freely*—as a gift of His grace.

“Well, it all sounds so appealing, so full of hope, but what if I blow it? What happens then?”

Okay, good question. What if you blow it? If your standing before God was based on your ability to perform, you would be in trouble. You just blew it! But what God offers you is not based on your performance; it is based on what Jesus did for you on the cross. God's grace is sufficient on your best days, and God's grace is sufficient on your worst days.

What it says in Romans chapter 5 is that somehow, somehow, we all sinned in Adam. Now it's hard to figure out exactly what that means—and we could argue that all day long—but what Paul says is the evidence that that's true is that we're all subject to death—and that is the consequence. So while we may argue the fairness of that, the reality is we're all dying, so we all must be guilty. Because we all sinned *in Adam*, therefore our nature, our standing, was in Adam, and in Adam we were enslaved to sin. We were cut off from a relationship with God. But the moment you trusted Christ as Savior, you transferred from being *in Adam* to being *in Christ*—the second Adam. And now in Christ you have been set free. You have been totally and radically changed. You are a new

creation in Christ. Paul reminds us that you were *in Adam* as a *wage*—in other words that’s what you earned. But you’re *in Christ* on the basis of a *gift*. Therefore, on your best days and on your worst days, God’s grace is sufficient for you.

“Okay, I understand that. But I’m still going to struggle with sin, aren’t I? I mean, this is just like my ticket to heaven isn’t it?”

As long as you’re convinced, as a Christian, that you will always struggle, you *will* always struggle. But you do not have to. It’s interesting how many people consider their salvation to be nothing more than a ticket to heaven. One of the reasons for that is because that’s often how we present the gospel. We give people three or four steps and: this is how you get to heaven. But the gospel story is so much more than that. It’s so much more powerful than that. In Romans chapter 6 Paul reminds us that we, when we trust Christ as Savior, identify with His death. The person that was me *in Adam* dies. I identify with His death. Not only am I dead, but I’m buried. How dead am I? I’m so dead that they buried me. They buried the old man—he’s dead and gone. This is really important to understand. When I have conversations with my friends who believe that you can somehow lose your salvation, the discussion is always around this idea that you can change your mind and you can go back. I would suggest you can’t go back because there’s no back to go back to. The old boy’s dead. He’s gone. He doesn’t exist anymore. There’s no way to go back.

But the text says that God didn’t leave us there. We also identify with the resurrection of Jesus. I am alive now in Christ. I’m no longer *in Adam*. I’m *in Christ*, and because of that, I have been set free. I’m no longer a slave to sin. Sin’s not the boss. Sin’s not in charge. I just simply don’t have to live that way anymore. As a matter of fact, it’s all the way into Romans 6 that Paul gives the first command in the book of Romans and the command is: “Consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God through Jesus Christ.” The first command of Romans is simply to believe this! “You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

“If I’m no longer a slave to sin, how come I seem to struggle every day? Is there something wrong with me? Does this grace thing work for everyone?”

It’s interesting how often I get that question, “Does this work for everyone?” as if it’s some sort of a fad diet that maybe works for some people and not others. Yes, it works for everyone! The very fact that you struggle is a good sign. It means that something deep within you has changed. You now have a new nature. You’re now *in Christ*. You now have a new-found passion for righteousness. That’s why it bothers you. That’s why you struggle. You say, “I don’t want to live this way.” So we’re still left with the question, “Why do I struggle?”

Well, the illustration Paul uses in Romans 7 is that of a marriage. Some of you here this morning were in a previous marriage and the marriage was a bad marriage, perhaps it was an abusive marriage and, in order to survive that context, you had certain ways of coping. You had certain thought patterns. You had certain things that you developed in order to survive that marriage. But now you are out of that marriage and you’re in a new marriage, but it’s still the same *you* that was in the bad marriage, so you bring certain coping skills; you bring certain thought patterns; you bring certain behaviors that defined your first marriage, and you bring it into the second marriage—and it begins to cause destruction in your second marriage if you don’t deal with those things.

Paul says that we were married in Adam; we were married to the Law. The Law had no power to set us free from our sin. The Law revealed our sin. When I looked in the mirror of the Law, what I saw was a sinner and as long as that is what I see, as long as that’s my identity, that’s how I’m

going to live—because that’s what I focus on all the time. That was my marriage. But in order to enter into a new marriage, I first have to die to the first marriage. I can’t just add a new wife. I can’t have two wives. I can’t add Jesus to the Law. So I died to the first operating system in order to embrace Jesus that comes by grace. Grace is now the new operating system and in the new marriage, I’ve been set free. I look in the mirror and I see God’s righteousness and I have a new identity. But there still is a struggle. The struggle is because there’s still *me*—what the Bible would call my *flesh*. There was *me* that was in the first marriage and I developed certain thought patterns. I developed certain behaviors. I developed certain ways of coping with life separated from God.

When you trust Christ as Savior, nobody hits a delete button. I take that into my new marriage and little by little I have to deal with those behaviors and those thought patterns and those things that can now be destructive in my new marriage, because I understand now I am married to Christ, under grace. It’s very important to understand the problem is not that we have two natures. I don’t believe you can have two natures. You can’t be both darkness and light at the same time. You can’t be in Adam *and* in Christ. You’re in Christ. You’ve been set free. You have something that’s changed radically in the inside, but there’s still a struggle, and the struggle is against the flesh and these patterns and these habits that are the residue from my first marriage.

“Okay, so what’s the solution? Do I just need to try harder?”

As long as the solution for you is to try *harder*, I guarantee you will struggle your entire Christian life. The solution is not to try harder. The solution is to believe, to believe that God tells the truth. All the way along, Satan whispers in your ear that this isn’t going to work, that this isn’t true; you’re always going to struggle; you’re never going to rise above this. But God tells you the truth—that you have been set free! At the end of Romans chapter 7 Paul says, “Who will set me free from this struggle?” It’s not a, “*What* will set me free?” It’s a “*Who*” and the answer to the “who” is Romans chapter 8—the Spirit of Jesus. God so wants you to live out this new life in Christ, He’s actually filled you and empowered you with His own Spirit. You literally have everything you need to live out this new life in Christ.

“That’s amazing! The good news is really good. How can it get any better?”

Yes, how could it get any better? The only way it could get better is if there was a promise that this is eternally secure. And that’s what Paul says in the second half of Romans chapter 8: “He whom God justified, God *will glorify*.” It doesn’t say that’s a possibility. It doesn’t say that *might* happen. It’s actually a promise that God *will finish* what He started. He has started His work in you and He promises to get you to the finish line. If it’s based on the finished work of Jesus on the cross and not on the basis of your performance, then nothing about Jesus’ finished work is ever going to change. You’ve been clothed with the eternal righteousness of God. God promises to get you to the finish line. Your future is more glorious than words could describe. So he tells us in Romans chapter 8: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” He says—and we read it this morning—“Nothing can separate us from the love of God.” No matter what this world throws at you, nothing will change what God has done for you. Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Throughout your lifetime I am convinced that people will put certain labels on you, most of them not very flattering. But the name tag that God puts on you, on the basis of the fact that you are in Christ, is you are overwhelmingly a conqueror on your best days *and* on your worst days, because you’re *in Christ*. The name tag that God puts on you is, “You are a champion!” And if you believe that, you will live like that.

“When I read through the Old Testament, it seems like God made a lot of promises to the Israelites that He didn’t keep. What if He doesn’t keep His promises to us?”

That’s a good question. A lot of people think that. But the truth is that God kept His promises to the Hebrew people perfectly. God never said that *every* Jewish person would be saved. What He *did* promise is there would always be a remnant that would define the people of God. But in order for God to keep His promise, God had to sovereignly interject Himself into the story. He had to actually elect or choose those to be saved; otherwise no one would have been saved, because of their rebellion. And God reminds us that He chooses and elects us for salvation. There’s clearly a mystery to this, but the biggest question is: why would God choose you and me to be a vessel of His mercy, to be the recipient of the family fortune, and to pour out His riches on us?

It does raise the question though: what about human responsibility? Romans chapter 10 deals with that and reminds us that everyone who comes to faith, comes to faith on the basis of a choice. By faith we believe, so human responsibility means that we must choose. I do believe that every single person has the potential to be saved. I think, “Whosoever will, may come.” I don’t think there’s anybody that can’t be saved because they’re non-elect. You say, “Now wait a minute; that doesn’t make sense. How can both of those truths be true?” And the answer is, “I have no idea! But the Bible clearly teaches both and we have to trust God with that.”

Romans chapter 11 is pulling the story together and, at the end of that, the biggest question is: why would God choose you? You were His enemy. You were in rebellion. Why did God choose you to pour out His riches—the riches of His grace? And the answer is: “I don’t know. We just need to celebrate and be thankful that God indeed did.”

“So if all of this is true, and I choose to believe, what does God expect of me?”

So let me ask you the question: What do you think would be a reasonable response to what God has done for you as we have described it in the first 11 chapters of Romans? Paul says a reasonable response is that we would surrender ourselves back to God. We would sacrifice ourselves for God. But this is not some sort of a religious obligation. This is, rather, saying: if we’ve come to believe that God is the source of life; God is our freedom; God is the one who satisfies the restlessness in my soul; God is the One who gives life meaning and purpose; if God is the one I’ve been longing for; if this is where paradise is found, then wouldn’t it make sense that I would surrender myself to God rather than continuing trying to be my own god? I do that, then, by not conforming to this world—in other words not conforming to the selfishness and the self-righteousness of this world—but that I’m transformed. How does that happen? By the renewing of my mind—I *think* differently.

Okay, where do we start with that? We start with Romans 12:3, “...by not thinking more highly of myself than I ought to think, but to actually consider others as more important than myself.” In other words, if grace is true, then I’ve done nothing—then I have no basis to be arrogant. But because God has set me free from my sin and my selfishness, I am now free to love. I am free to live life differently. I can love my neighbor as myself. I can overcome evil with good.

“So if God is now my King, what’s my responsibility to human authority, like the government for example?”

Just because God is now my King doesn’t mean I’m not responsible to governing authorities. As a matter of fact, Romans 13 says governing authorities are servants of God. They’re ministers of

God. The biblical view of government would be any government is better than no government because we live in a sinful, fallen world. It is easy to become very critical of the government. We live in a culture where, if we disagree, we can voice our opinion. If we disagree, we can elect different people, but as long as the law is the law of the land, we are required to be obedient to that law. And before we complain too much, it's really helpful to remind ourselves that we live better than almost any people have lived in the history of the world. Rather than spending so much time complaining, maybe we should appreciate what we have and maybe what we have more than anything else is, as the people of God, we have total freedom to fulfill the mission. We need to spend less time complaining and more time focusing time on the mission and getting the job done. It's really important to remember that we are required to be submissive to the law whether you agree with that law or not. Just because you disagree with the law, doesn't mean you have the freedom to disobey it. The only exception to that is when the law requires you to do something that violates God's law and, at that point, God's law must take priority. But Paul finishes that discussion by reminding us that if we did things God's way—if we loved our neighbor as ourselves—governments wouldn't be necessary.

“Okay, so I get the whole ‘love your neighbor’ thing in principle, but what does that look like in everyday life?”

What does it look like in everyday life? It starts with Romans 12:3, “...not to think more highly of myself than I ought to think, but to think of others as more important than myself.” I'm reminded that the ultimate expression of what it means to be *in Christ* is to be free. “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.” But it's not free to be reckless. It's not free to be selfish. It's not free to do harm to others. It's a freedom to sacrifice. It's a freedom to give myself away.

Paul reminds us that, within the body of Christ, there are those who struggle with areas of weakness. There are those who, for one reason or another, have not yet found freedom in Christ in certain areas of life. I can't just ignore that. I can't dismiss that but, rather, I'm willing to set aside some of my freedoms in order to respect that, but also in order to roll up my sleeves and help carry the load—that we would say to those who struggle, “Hey, I know you are struggling; I respect that, and I want you to know it's safe here and I'm going to roll up my sleeves and I'm going to help carry the load and we're going to get through this together.” We have the freedom to die to ourselves in order to serve one another.

Paul's ultimate vision for us, as the body of Christ, is that we would create a place where legalism is neutralized. We simply do not have to live our lives enslaved to the legalists around us, but that we would respect legitimate weakness and that we would share in that weakness by helping carry the load, that people would know you are safe here and we are going to get through this together but, ultimately, that we would celebrate freedom in Christ, understanding the ultimate understanding of what it means to be *in Christ* is to be free and that we would celebrate that—to create a culture so compelling that the world would find it irresistible.

“Okay, give me the big summary in one or two sentences: The gospel story is what?”

Okay, here we go: The gospel story is from Genesis to Revelation—the story of God fulfilling His promise to make a way for sinful men and women to have a relationship with a holy God and to spend forever with Him in *Paradise*. According to Romans chapter 1, the gospel story is the story of Jesus Christ, God's Son, according to the Scriptures, to the nations, for obedience—for God's glory. Let me say it all one more time. The gospel story is the story of God's fulfillment of His promise from Genesis to Revelation—to make a way by which sinful men and women can have a

relationship with a holy God and to spend forever with Him in *Paradise*. According to Romans chapter 1, the gospel story is the story of Jesus Christ, God's Son, according to the Scriptures, for the nations, to bring about obedience—for God's glory!

“Okay, great, the most critical thing, then, for me to do is what?”

I hope you know the answer to that one. The most critical thing for all of us is what? Is to believe! The enemy whispers in your ear and tells you this isn't true. God tells you it *is* true. You're going to have to decide which to believe. We've talked about this model—that you first have to understand something in order to believe it. If you believe it, you will live it. But there is a reality that I'm never going to live it if I don't believe it and I can't believe it if I don't understand it! Okay, fine; we've spent twenty-four weeks trying to understand it. I can help you with that part, but I can't believe it *for you*. You're going to have to decide: Do I believe this or not—and believe it to such a degree that I actually live it?

My prayer throughout the series on Romans was not to overwhelm you with a lot of theological talk. My goal was very simple: “You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free!”

Father, we're thankful that You have given us this magnificent book of Romans. Lord, we're thankful that when we were enemies, lost in our sin, You offered us salvation freely as a gift. Lord, there isn't a single person here this morning that is beyond Your grace, that is beyond the salvation that You freely offer. Lord, give us the courage to believe, to believe that we are now in Christ, to believe that we have been set free, to believe that we have Your Spirit within us, to believe that we have everything we need to live this life and to believe that we are eternally secure. Lord, I pray that we would believe this to such a degree that we would live like it, that others would come to know the One who has set us free. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

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