

## **The Gospel** **Romans 1:2-7**

One of the great truths of Scripture is that believers are required to share their faith in Christ with those who do not yet possess that faith. So important was this obligation to the risen Christ, that He made it the topic of one of His last conversations on earth. With His disciples gathered around Him, He said “<sup>19</sup>go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>teaching them to follow all that I commanded you; and behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20). And just prior to His ascension, Jesus reiterated this command. “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and Samaria, and as far as the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). It seems sensible, though, that in order for us, as followers of Christ, to fulfill that great commission, we must first have a clear and correct understanding of the gospel ourselves.

This is even more important, perhaps, today than ever before, as many people, presuming to call themselves Christians, have reinterpreted the gospel for their own advantage. I am not sure that there has ever been so many different versions of the gospel in the marketplace of ideas as there are today. So, as we try to apply the principles of Scripture to our lives and live out our understanding of the faith, believers must, first and foremost, have a correct understanding of the gospel as it is taught in Scripture, not as we would want it to be for our own convenience. Paul understood this, and that is why, after introducing himself to the church at Rome, he began the body of his letter with a clear presentation of the gospel.

Remember that Paul saw himself as a slave of Christ, and that he sought to serve the Kingdom of God by preaching the gospel to the Gentile populations of the Roman Empire. This remarkable clarity of purpose became indispensable to his every action and compelled him to journey many thousands of miles preaching the truth of Jesus Christ and establishing churches in His name. The humble church at Rome, located at the center of this great empire and not yet blessed with the benefits of apostolic instruction, must have seemed the perfect place to impart some of the wisdom Paul had gleaned from his encounters with the risen Christ. So, to prepare for his visit there, he wrote them this letter, encouraging the members of the church at Rome in the faith, teaching them about the importance of the Jews and Jewish traditions, clarifying their theology, and giving them practical ways to live a life worthy of their calling as sons and daughters of the Most High God.

After introducing himself as “Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God” (Romans 1:1), Paul took the time to spell out exactly what that gospel was. His clear and concise description of the gospel formed the foundation of his preaching and teaching. It shaped his theology and his understanding of his relationship to Christ. It guided his thinking and determined his actions. Paul’s understanding of the gospel was the determining factor in the choices he made and the way he chose to live his life.

And like Paul, the same is true for each of us. As A. W. Tozer once wrote, “what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us,” *The Knowledge of the Holy*. A right understanding of Who God is, what He has done, and what He expects of us is essential. It is

indispensable to our faith in Christ. So it makes perfect sense, then, that as Paul began this letter to the Romans, he began with a presentation of the gospel, and it is our opportunity this morning to enjoy reviewing it.

### **The Antiquity of the Gospel**

To begin, Paul wanted to make it clear that the gospel was not something new. Neither was the gospel an afterthought. In other words, God did not come up with the gospel after the Fall as an antidote to, or solution for, the problem of human sin. It was not a change in His divine strategy, or an alternative arrangement, but instead was His sovereign plan from the beginning. As Paul wrote, the gospel was something “which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures” (v. 2). Thus, Paul began by making it clear that the gospel message he preached did not originate with him. Nor was it a product of the others in the New Testament Church. In fact, it was not even something that Jesus, Himself, had initiated. Instead, the gospel was a truth that was ancient in its origins. It had been spoken of by the earliest prophets.

However, Paul used the term prophets somewhat differently than we might anticipate. By prophets, he did not mean only people like Daniel, Isaiah, and Micah, but rather any Old Testament person who spoke on behalf of God. That is, in Paul’s view, Moses was a prophet. Paul wanted his audience to understand that the gospel was an idea that permeated the Old Testament writings from their very beginning. And it was important to Paul that the focus of those at Rome to be on those Old Testament Scriptures, rather than the rabbinical teachings. Remember that the church in Rome had likely been founded by Jews who had received faith at Pentecost. Though the Gentile members of the church had been left to themselves after the banishment of Jews from Rome in 49AD, with their return it was necessary for the Gentile congregants to be refreshed on the importance of the Jewish contribution to Christianity. And most Jews, of Paul’s day, focused instead on rabbinical teachings such as the Talmud. Paul wanted to correct that, and so he attempted to turn the attention of the church in Rome to the Old Testament.

Paul, himself, had been trained in these rabbinical teachings, and he knew firsthand that these man-made sources of truth were emphasized more highly than the Old Testament Scriptures. It was a clear failing of Judaism at the time of Christ, one He addressed in His Sermon on the Mount. Whenever Jesus used the phrase “you have heard it said . . .” (Matthew 5:21, 27, 22, 28, 43), He was not referencing Old Testament Scripture but rather rabbinical teachings that were merely human traditions. Jesus was trying to make it clear to His listeners that the man-made traditions of the religious leaders were not in alignment with the Word of God.

This was the great challenge of the Jews at this time, and ever since. They needed to set aside their own man-made understanding of the Messiah and accept the truths of Old Testament Scripture as they pointed to Jesus as the Christ. This was the first point Paul wanted to make as he outlined his understanding of the gospel to the church at Rome. The Christian gospel had been spoken of by the prophets.

### **The Center of the Gospel**

Having made it clear that the gospel had been promised by God since the beginning, Paul wanted to make it equally clear Whom the gospel concerned. So he continued, “<sup>3</sup>concerning His Son, who was born of a seed of David according to the flesh, <sup>4</sup>who was declared with power to be the Son of God by the

resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord” (v. 3-4). This is the heart of the gospel message. It remains the central tenet of the Christian faith. All else hinges on this one reality - that Jesus was both God and man, that He died for the sins of humanity, and that He was raised from the dead to dwell in glory at the right hand of the Father.

One of the great, and inscrutable, facts of the Christian faith is that Jesus Christ is both God, and God’s Son. That is to say, in His incarnate form, Jesus was both fully God and fully man. Church councils have disputed this truth and wrong thinking about this fundamental biblical principle have permeated the Christian church almost since its inception. But a proper understanding of this weighty truth is necessary to a correct understanding of the gospel message.

To begin, Scripture clearly states that Jesus was fully human. Paul wrote that Jesus was “born of a seed of David according to the flesh” (v. 3). Elsewhere, Scripture informs us that the biological mother of Jesus, Mary, (Luke 1:27) and his legal father, Joseph, (Matthew 1:6, 16), were both descendants of David. But these were not merely historical facts. They were a fulfillment of prophecy. The historical books, literature, and prophetic books of the Old Testament all pointed to the future Messiah being the descendant of David (2 Samuel 7:12-13; Psalm 89:3-4; Isaiah 11:1-5; Jeremiah 23:5-6). In His human birth, Jesus fulfilled those prophecies.

Even pagan sources identified Jesus as a real historical figure. For example, the Roman historian Tacitus, writing his *Annals* in the early second century, recorded that a man named Jesus had been the founder of a new religious sect and had been put to death for his actions by Pontius Pilate during the reign of the emperor Tiberius (*Annals*, Book 15, paragraph 44). This aligns perfectly with the biblical narrative. Perhaps more remarkably, even the first century Jewish historian, Josephus, wrote,

“Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day” (*Antiquities*, Book 18, chapter 4).

Thus, the humanity of Christ is attributed in both Scripture and other historical sources. But Jesus was also fully divine. Consider another passage from a letter by Paul,

“<sup>5</sup>Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup>who, as He already existed in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, <sup>7</sup>but emptied Himself by taking the form of a bond-servant and being born in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup>And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death: death on a cross” (Philippians 2:5-8).

And this is the crucial point. Many people willingly acknowledge that a man named Jesus lived some two thousand years ago, said many wonderful and insightful things, and was cruelly killed for His alleged crimes. Such details are too common as historical facts to be reasonably denied. But the stumbling block

is when it comes to acknowledging Jesus as the “Son of God” (v. 4) Who took on human form. It is not the humanity, but the divinity of Christ, that is the stumbling block.

“Son of God” is a title, though eternal in its conception, that relates particularly to the incarnate Christ. This is what Paul intended when he stated that Jesus “was declared with power to be the Son of God” (v. 4). Jesus was the Son of God from all eternity, but earthly fulfillment of that reality occurred at His incarnation. The word Paul used for ‘declared’ is *horizō*, the word from which we get horizon, the boundary between earth and sky. That is, the incarnation marked off the moment when the Son of God became man. Here is a favorite passage of mine that says this most elegantly.

“<sup>1</sup>In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup>All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him not even one thing came into being that has come into being. . . . <sup>14</sup>And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us; and we saw His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1-3, 14).

This declaration of Jesus as the Son of God was made “by the resurrection from the dead” (v. 4). The resurrection was the irrefutable evidence that Jesus was indeed divine. None but God could overcome death. As Paul argued on his first missionary journey in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch,

“<sup>29</sup>When they had carried out everything that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb. <sup>30</sup>But God raised Him from the dead; <sup>31</sup>and for many days He appeared to those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, the very ones who are now His witnesses to the people. <sup>32</sup>And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, <sup>33</sup>that God has fulfilled this promise to those of us who are the descendants by raising Jesus” (Acts 13:29-33).

The resurrection validated the ministry of Jesus. If there had remained a body in the tomb, all that Jesus had said and done would have been wonderful, no doubt, to those who witnessed the miracles and were blessed by His healing power and fed by His provision, but it would have been irrelevant in terms of eternity. There have been many other great men and women who have spoken profound truths and done marvelous things. But there has been only One Who promised to rise from the dead and did so.

One other point that Paul is making in this explanation of the gospel is that we can see, in this passage, the working of the Trinity. This was the “<sup>1</sup>the gospel of God, <sup>2</sup>which He promised” (v. 1-2), “concerning His Son” (v.3), “according to the Spirit of holiness” (v. 4). All three persons in the Trinity are involved in the gospel. There is perfect harmony among the three persons of the Godhead. They act in unison to bring about the perfect plan of salvation to all who believe the gospel.

Throughout His earthly life, Jesus reflected both the human and the divine. To take but one example of many, “<sup>38</sup>And yet Jesus Himself was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke Him and said to Him, ‘Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?’ <sup>39</sup>And He got up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, ‘hush, be still.’ And the wind died down and it became perfectly calm” (Mark 4:38-39). The human Jesus that could be fatigued at the end of a long day of ministry was also the God Who could command nature and compel it to obey.

## **The Results of the Gospel**

Paul next explained that the two immediate results of receiving the gospel are position and vocation. The consequence of accepting the truth that Jesus is the Son of God Who was resurrected from the dead is that “we have received grace and apostleship” (v. 5). Grace is the action by which God gives us a position in His family. Apostleship, in the general understanding of being someone who has the responsibility to share the gospel, is our inherited vocation as a child of God.

Scripture could not be more clear that we are saved by grace, “<sup>8</sup>for by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; <sup>9</sup>not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). Grace is most simply defined as unmerited favor. That is, grace is something given, to which the receiver has no proper or justifiable claim. By its very definition, grace cannot be earned. Grace is not something to which someone has a right. Grace is never something that *should* happen.

In terms of the gospel, then, it is apparent that grace is something that is the exclusive prerogative of God. As Paul will concisely explain later in this same letter, “<sup>23</sup>for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup>being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:23-24). Since all people who have ever lived have sinned, and since Scripture teaches that any single sin is sufficient to separate us forever from God, the only possible means by which we can be saved is through the free and unobligated gift of God’s grace.

Grace is not something we can earn by church attendance, tithing, good works, devout times of prayer, diligent study of the Scriptures, or teaching an adult Sunday school class. Grace is not something we can merit by being a responsible citizen, a good neighbor, and living a respectable life. Grace is not something that comes to us because we believe in God or even believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Even the demons possess such an understanding (Mark 5:7). Grace is the gift of God, to those Whom He chooses, to impart the faith to accept the compassionate provision of Christ’s death on the cross as the atonement for their sins and to receive that forgiveness with a repentant heart. Paul saw the gospel as a matter of grace. And to Paul, grace was always amazing.

Apostleship is the life’s work of the believer. All who receive the gift of salvation are thereby sent by God on a particular mission. As believers, we are sent into this lost world with the message of the very gospel by which we were saved. Our most obvious, and primary, duty is to tell those whom God puts into our paths about the change God has wrought in us. I can think of two reasons why receiving the gift of faith ought to motivate believers to share the gospel. First, our desire to eagerly share the gospel is the proper response to God to show the gratitude we have for our salvation. If we are truly thankful for being saved, then we ought to demonstrate that thankfulness by acting in obedience to Christ’s final command. Second, sharing the gospel is the greatest kindness we can do to our fellow man. Any other random act of kindness, however genuine, serves to meet the needs of our fellow humans in this world only. But the gospel changes the destiny of man for all eternity. After all, it is a very selfish person who wants to go to heaven alone.

I would also remind us that this is not a duty that fell only to the original apostles, nor is it the obligation of only those blessed with the spiritual gift of evangelism. While it certainly is true that some believers may be specially gifted by God with the ability to evangelize, that does not exclude any other believer

from the responsibility to share the gospel in whatever context God places them. Just as some have been particularly gifted by God for works of mercy, or service, it does not mean that other believers can be calloused and lazy. To not engage in evangelism when God gives us the opportunity to do so is to act in disobedience and to not perform the most primary task that we were given when we were saved.

### **The Intention of the Gospel**

But we are not saved simply to be able to tell others about Christ only. There is much more to living a Christian life than that. The gospel teaches us that the purpose of receiving this grace was “<sup>5</sup>to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for His name’s sake, <sup>6</sup>among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ” (v. 5-6).

Notice that grace brings about obedience. The ability to obey what God has commanded is the result of the gift of grace. Again, it is not our obedience that somehow merits us God’s grace. We can only obey because God gives us the grace to do so. Augustine wrote this prayer in about the year 400AD, “God, give me the grace to do as you command, and command me to do what you will.” Such thinking was contrary to other believers even then. An English monk named Pelagius disputed the notion that people could only obey God if God gave them the grace to do so. Pelagius argued that man had the innate ability within himself to do good. In doing so he denied the influence of original sin and claimed that grace could be earned. Such an understanding of the gospel still permeates the Church today.

Scripture makes it abundantly clear that we are saved by God for the purpose of doing good works. Again Paul, “we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10). God has prepared good works for us to do, and God gives us the grace to do them. The obligation of the believer is to act upon that gift of grace in obedience. Our faith is verified in our obedience. It is by acting in obedience that the believer receives the assurance of their salvation. And the opposite is equally true. A person who claims to be a Christian and to have had a conversion experience, but who does not align his words, actions, and thoughts with God’s will is only fooling themselves. “<sup>3</sup>By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. <sup>4</sup>The one who says, ‘I have come to know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 John 2:3-4).

In writing his letter to the Romans, Paul began by commending them for their faith, “first, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the world” (Romans 1:8). At the end of this same letter, he commended them for their obedience, “for the report of your obedience has reached everyone; therefore I am rejoicing over you” (Romans 16:19). Paul rightly understood that the gospel indissolubly links faith with obedience.

A second purpose of the gospel was to bring glory to God. Our obedience was “for His name’s sake” (v. 5). God’s ultimate purpose in salvation was not simply to bless humanity, but rather to demonstrate His glory. The incarnate Christ understood this. Even His own obedience was done to bring glory to the Father. “For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me” (John 6:38). Believers must understand that we do not live for ourselves. We exist for the glory of God and our words, thoughts, and actions ought to reflect that truth.

## **The Benefits of the Gospel**

Paul concluded his presentation of the gospel by enumerating four benefits that the gospel brings to all believers. Paul saw first, that the believers are loved by God, “to all who are beloved of God in Rome” (v. 7). Though it may seem trite, we cannot overstate the importance of being loved by God. In fact, being loved by God is one of the most emphasized blessings of having a relationship with Him. It was often the theme of Israel’s worship.

“Remember, Lord, Your compassion and Your lovingkindness,  
For they have been from of old” (Psalm 25:6).

As well as the message of Israel’s prophets.

“I will recount the steadfast love of the Lord,  
the praises of the Lord,  
according to all that the Lord has granted us,  
and the great goodness to the house of Israel  
that he has granted them according to his compassion,  
according to the abundance of his steadfast love” (Isaiah 63:7, ESV).

The power of being loved by God was not lost on New Testament writers either.

“<sup>4</sup>But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, <sup>5</sup>even when we were dead in our wrongdoings, made us alive together with Christ” (Ephesians 2:4-5).

“See how great a love the Father has given us, that we would be called children of God; and in fact we are” (1 John 3:1).

Though it has sadly become something of a Christian cliché, being loved by God is an extraordinary blessing for believers.

Second, Paul also saw that believers were called into a relationship by God. They were “called as saints” (v. 7). This calling is not the same as the general calling to all humankind, such as that given by Jesus when He said “come to Me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). That was a calling as well, but in this case Paul is referring to God’s calling of His elect. That is, those whom God had predestined to salvation. In a very frequently referred to passage from later in this letter, Paul explained that,

“<sup>28</sup>we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. <sup>29</sup>For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters; <sup>30</sup>and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified” (Romans 8:28-30).

That we are called by God means that we cannot lose what God has graciously given us. Had we been saved by our works, we could then lose our salvation by our disobedience. But since the act of salvation is by God’s grace alone, we can be assured that we need never fear being uncalled.

Third, believers are “called as saints” (v. 7), a term, *hagios*, that means those God has set apart for His own particular purposes. It is important to understand that believers are not called because they are saints, but rather they are saints because they are called. Again, this was a concept easily understood by those Jews in the congregation at Rome. They knew quite well that God had chosen those whom He had set apart for His own purposes. Isaac was set apart to carry on the family line and receive the promises of land, seed, and blessing, though he was not the firstborn of Abraham's sons. The same was true of Jacob, who received the blessing of his father instead of his older brother, Esau. And it was true of Joseph as well, though he was the twelfth of Jacob's sons. Later in the Old Testament, the entire tribe of Levi was set apart by God to serve in His worship.

Finally, Paul saw that believers inherit as blessings, grace and peace - “grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 7). Only those in a relationship with the Creator and Sustainer of the universe can hope to have a life filled with grace and peace. The concept of grace, *charis*, Paul has already mentioned, as it was a favorite theme of his. It is simply the free favor specially manifested by God towards man in the gospel scheme.

Peace, *eirēnē*, is a concept that carries with it two implications. The first is that of being safe and comforted in a fallen world. As Jesus explained to His often confused and frightened disciples,

“<sup>31</sup>Jesus replied to them, ‘do you now believe?’ <sup>32</sup>Behold, an hour is coming, and has already come, for you to be scattered, each to his own home, and to leave Me alone; and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me. <sup>33</sup>These things I have spoken to you so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world” (John 16:31-33).

The second implication is that we also have nothing to fear from our Maker. We have peace with God. As Paul later explained, “having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1). The gospel teaches us that our sins are forgiven, and there is not need to fear the wrath of an unappeased God. We can face both life and death with the understanding that God is our ally.

### **Takeaways**

We cannot properly share a gospel we do not understand. Scripture reminds us that “we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us” (2 Corinthians 5:20). And if we are ambassadors for Christ, then we must have a solid understanding of Who He is and What he expects. We are responsible for relating His message to a fallen world, and we cannot do that if we do not have a clear understanding of the gospel ourselves.

The truth of the gospel leads the believer to the only life worth having. Not only is it an eternal life in the presence of God (John 3:16), but it is a possession that no one can ever take from us (John 10:29), providing a love from which we can never be separated (Romans 8:38-39), and an inheritance that will never fade away (1 Peter 1:4-5). Surely, there can be nothing greater.