

# **ROMANS**

## Part 1: “Paul’s Letter to the Roman Church”

Romans 1:1–7

By David A. Ritchie

Sunday, January 2, 2022

### **Scripture Reading**

*“Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 1:1–7).*

### **Introduction**

For a moment, I want you to imagine a local church that is trying to navigate a turbulent time together. Recently, there has been a transition in power at the highest levels of government. And one of the outcomes of that transition is that this church begins to experience a tremendous amount of internal tension.

You see, this church is fairly diverse in terms of culture and background and views. And when this church gathers, this high-pressured moment has tempted the church to be divided on cultural lines. It’s tempting for this church to be drawn into a culture war of sorts. One might wonder: will this church be able to endure; can they make it? Or, will they eventually fall apart and dissolve into little subgroups that are divided along worldly lines?

Then, the midst of this situation, this church receives a letter from a missionary; a missionary who wants to raise funds to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth. The church has never met this missionary face-to-face, but they have certainly heard of him.

And the letter they receive from this missionary is no ordinary letter. Yes, the missionary requests the church’s financial help to continue his ministry. He even provides counsel and wisdom regarding the cultural tension within the church. However, this letter will also include one of the most glorious visions of the Christian gospel that has ever been written.

That church was the church of Rome in the first century A.D. That missionary was Paul the Apostle. And that letter is “Paul’s Letter to the Roman Church.”

In this letter, Paul exhorts the Christians of Rome—both Jews and Gentiles—to find a common unity and a common love that is only made possible by the resurrected Christ, who alone stands as Lord and Judge. He shows them how all Christians from all backgrounds have a profound spiritual need and how that need is met only in Jesus. He displays how the good news of Son of God is the only hope for all people of all nations, and that for that reason, it must be declared and displayed far and wide. Romans is a book that is about the power and the glory of the gospel.

### **The Significance of Romans**

Romans wasn’t the first, and it wasn’t the last of Paul’s letters, but it is his longest. And, arguably, it is his most historically influential letter within the New Testament.

The letter to the Romans will be responsible for the conversion of Augustine of Hippo (show image [1Augustine](#)), who in turn becomes the most important theologian of the ancient church. Augustine would be the thinker who taught the church that sin is disordered love and that in Christ alone we will find our truest rest and truest delight.

Romans will be the book of the Bible through which Martin Luther (show image [2Luther](#)) would rediscover the radical truth that we are justified and made righteous, through no effort of our own, but, by faith alone. And that single truth will become the lynchpin of the Protestant Reformation.

The book of Romans would also warm the heart of a man named John Wesley (show image [3Wesley](#)), who would be one of the fires that would ignite the Great Awakening, which is probably the most significant revival of the modern era.

Fast-forward to the early twentieth century, in the midst of World War 1 and the Spanish Flu. Most of academic theology (especially in Germany) had sanitized the Christian faith to meet the demands of the Enlightenment. Miracles were no longer believable. Christian faith was reduced to a privatized sense of religious feeling. It was in this context that a Swiss pastor named Karl Barth (show image [4Barth](#)) began to study the book of Romans. Barth wrote a commentary that shocked the theological world into a renewed awareness of the power of divine revelation and the transcendent glory of God.

I say all of this to stress that, through this book, the Holy Spirit has a long-standing pattern of radically changing human hearts and radically altering the course of human history.

So, as we study this book together, I want to encourage you to *lean in*. Open your heart and humble your mind. Come back to the passages we study on Sundays throughout

your week. Listen carefully to how the Holy Spirit might speak to you through this marvelous letter. For when we read this letter, we stand on hallowed ground.

Our passage today is Paul's greeting, in which he introduces himself to his readers. Sometimes when you read the epistles (or letters) of the New Testament, it is tempting to gloss over the greetings without slowing down to pay attention. But of all of Paul's greetings in all of Paul's letters, Paul's greeting in Romans is by far the longest and the most laden with significance.

In fact, in these first seven verses of Romans are hidden previews for many of the big ideas that will become the major themes, as well as cornerstones that will help us understand this letter. We'll address six of those ideas one by one.

### **1.) Paul the Servant and Apostle**

Paul is the author of Romans. He was simultaneously a controversial and a crucial figure of early Christianity.

Once, he was one of the greatest opponents of the Christian gospel. Now he is the most fervent promoter of that same gospel. Once, he was zealous for Jewish nationalism, cultural exceptionalism, and rigorous ethnic and religious purity. Now he is zealous for the glory of Jesus Christ and the salvation of people from all nations.

The transformation of Paul testifies to what can happen when we truly see the brilliance and beauty of Jesus.

This transformation is even evident from his very name. Paul was once known as Saul, which is a very Jewish, a very Hebrew name. However, he adopts the name Paul, which is a Greek name, when he begins to preach the gospel of Jesus to the people of gentile nations living in gentile lands.

The mission of God to the nations is so important to Paul that he has incorporated it into his very identity. He is "*Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus...*" (Rom 1:1). Like a servant (δοῦλος) before a master, Paul has yielded the totality of his being to the reality of God. Half-hearted devotion to one as glorious as Christ will not do.

He is also "*...called to be an apostle...*" (Rom 1:1). That term "apostle" (ἀπόστολος) means he is *one who has been sent by Another*. Paul's identity as an apostle is not self-designated or self-ascribed—it is a given identity, a *commanded* identity.

And like his identity, Paul's authority is not generated by himself, nor is it maintained by himself. Paul's authority derives from God and God alone. He does not proclaim a message that comes from within himself, but a message that comes from above and beyond himself.

The nature of that message leads us to our next point.

## 2.) The Gospel of God

Paul has been “...set apart for the gospel of God” (Rom 1:1). The word “gospel” comes is translated from the Greek term “euangelion” (εὐαγγέλιον), which literally means good news.

Many people today understand “gospel” and “good news” as terms that have explicitly Christian meaning. But in the time of the Roman empire, “euangelion/gospel/good news” was a term laden with political and often military significance.

Whenever a great general prevailed in battle, an announcement of “euangelion,” of “good news,” would be made. Whenever an enemy had been vanquished and a new dominion had been conquered by the empire, “euangelion” would be shared. And especially, when a new emperor had ascended onto the throne, “euangelion” would be proclaimed.

But the “euangelion” of that Paul is declaring is of a different category altogether. For it is not the gospel of man—it is “*the gospel of God.*”

The gospel of God is the announcement of apocalypse—meaning it is the dramatic in-breaking and unveiling of a new kingdom and a new era. It is the proclamation that—through the victory Jesus—the cosmic enemies of sin and death have been defeated. It is the declaration that—through the redeeming power of Jesus—people from all nations have been reclaimed from the powers of darkness and can now be included in the people of God. The gospel is good news that Jesus is ascended King of all kings, and the Lord of all lords!

The gospel of God is not merely powerful—it is *power* (cf. Rom 1:16). As the very word of God, it has the power to bring forth that which it proclaims. That which it contains, it continues—it imparts the very resurrection of Christ that gives life to God’s people and God’s church.

When Paul says this gospel is something that God “...promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures” (Rom 1:2), he is making clear this point: the gospel is not a new idea that Paul or anyone else invented. Rather, the gospel is the fullness of God’s redemptive work throughout human history. It is the culmination of all the hopes of Israel and every promise made in the Old Testament Scriptures.

If this gospel is true, it cannot be merely mentally assented to. It is something that must be announced and proclaimed; declared and displayed by his people.

## 3.) Jesus Christ Our Lord

The gospel of God is “concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom 1:3–4).

The gospel is not a list of theological propositions. The gospel is the revelation of a Person. Specifically, the gospel is God's self-revelation in and through Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

Paul here describes Jesus as the "Son of God," which is a term that refers both to Jesus's enthronement as the true, promised, anointed Liberator-King of Israel, as well as the fact that Jesus is the divine Son. He is the One who shares in the divine nature of God the Father.

Yet, Jesus also shares in human nature as well. He descended from royal but very human ancestors, like the great King David. Jesus was indeed born "according to the flesh" (Rom 1:3), meaning he took upon himself human weakness, frailty, and mortality.

That Christ is both according to the flesh and spirit signifies that he is both completely man and completely God, and, thus, the only one capable of being the Messiah. For only one who is man could endure the penalty of death. But only one who is God can overcome the power of death.

In Christ, eternity has intersected with human history. He who was and is immortal took upon himself mortality so that, in dying, he might defeat the power of death. In Christ, the problem of evil is not solved. The power of evil is defeated by the infinitely greater power of resurrection.

The resurrection did not make Jesus God—it confirms that he is God. The resurrection shows that the Lord Jesus Christ is of a different order than all other rulers of this world.

His kingdom is not of this world, though he claims rightful dominion over this world. He is not the patron god of a new religion, as if Christianity were simply one of many ancient cults. Jesus is the Lord of all creation. He is reclaiming his creation from the dominion of Sin and Death and making all things new!

The point of the Bible, the point of the gospel, the point of the church, the point of history is not about us—it is *all about Jesus*. He alone is worthy of our worship, our fascination, and our allegiance!

#### **4.) The Obedience of Faith**

The gospel of Jesus Christ cannot be earned, but it must be responded to. And the only response worthy of the gospel is what Paul calls "*obedience of faith*." Indeed, this is the purpose and aim of Paul's ministry—he has "*...received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of [Christ's] name among all the nations*" (Rom 1:5).

Faith is not merely knowing the gospel. Faith is not even merely believing the gospel. Faith is trusting the gospel. Faith is resting in the reality that the gospel is true.

Faith is not earned by righteous behavior. Faith is the instrument God uses to make us righteous!

And, when we grow in our ability to trust that the gospel is true, that trust will continually change and transform us to live in light of the gospel. When we continually accept the truth that Christ is Lord, we will necessarily submit ourselves more and more to his lordship.

Simply said, the more mature our faith, the more we will be drawn to faithfully love and trust the One who delivered us from the domain of death and welcomed us into his kingdom of life.

Faith brings forth faithfulness. Conversion brings forth commitment.

### **5.) The Church of Rome**

Is it not astonishing that the readers of Paul's letter are *"...all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his saints" (Rom 1:7a)*?

Jesus Christ was crucified under the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. His crime? He was accused by the Jewish religious leaders of claiming to be king. Rome doesn't tolerate rival kings with rival kingdoms, so they executed Jesus in the most humiliating and horrific way imaginable—death on the cross.

Many people died on crosses during the time of the Roman empire. It was the go-to punishment for anyone who would dare challenge the absolute authority of Caesar who lived in Rome. The cross was designed to foster fear and project power.

But because of the resurrection, the same cross that was once a symbol of the power of the empire of man becomes the symbol of the greater power of the kingdom of God.

And now, there are those in the city of Rome—the very heart of Caesar's empire that worship Jesus as Lord! There are gentile people from pagan backgrounds who have been included within the people of God and now belong to Jesus.

Paul's readers are no longer identified primarily as Romans. They are "saints" who are "in Rome"; they are holy ones who have been made holy by their union with Christ.

The church of Rome is, thus, an establishment of the city of God within the city of man; a colony of heaven in the land of death; an embassy of new creation in the midst of a perishing world.

### **6.) The Blessings of Grace and Peace**

The final words of Paul's opening are this: *"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 1:7b)*.

Here, Paul departs from the convention of standard letter writing. He does not greet his readers—he *blesses* them. He imparts to them the gifts of grace and peace.

God's grace is *unearned*—meaning it cannot be merited or deserved. God's grace is a *supernatural*—meaning it is miraculous in nature. God's grace is *superabundant*—meaning it is never lacking. God's grace is *incongruous*—meaning it cannot be reciprocated in equal measure; in fact, it can neither be added to or taken away. God's grace is *incomprehensible*—meaning it is a mystery beyond the horizon of full human understanding. That is the radical grace the gospel brings.

Peace, on the other hand, is a very Jewish concept with a rich history. It is the *shalom* of God; it is the restoration of wholeness and completeness. God's peace is the restoration of spiritual communion with our Creator; it is the redemption and recovery of what was lost in the Paradise of Eden.

Grace and peace—this is what the letter of the Romans can impart to those with eyes to see and ears to hear.

## **Conclusion**

I, too, have been a beneficiary of this remarkable book of the Bible.

Although I was raised in a Christian household and went to a Christian school, by my junior year in high school, I identified as an agnostic. I had big questions and a very low tolerance for shallow, hypocritical versions of Christianity that I witnessed in church and in the surrounding culture.

But by my second year of college, I had become friends with a group of Christians who made the Christian life attractive to me for the first time. I spent time in and around times of worship at a college ministry. And I decided to start reading the Bible a little more seriously.

One Resident Assistant (RA) in my dormitory heard that I was reading the Bible. He casually mentioned, "You know, if you really want to know what Christianity is all about, you should read the book of Romans."

So, I read Romans. When I started reading it, I was not a follower of Jesus. But by the time I finished, I was.

Much later, I would learn that I was in a long line of people, some very famous, many more unfamous, who were transformed by these Spirit-inspired words. Through this letter, the Holy Spirit of God illuminated my heart to see the glory of Jesus.

I pray that this letter would do the same for *you* as well.

So Redeemer Christian Church, may the Spirit of God shine the light of the of his revelation among us all over the course of the next year, as we study the book of

Romans. May we have unveiled eyes that behold Christ Jesus and the power and glory of the gospel. AMEN.

### **Gospel Community Discussion Starters**

1. *Read Romans 1:1–7 out loud. What key words and phrases do you see in these first few verses of Romans?*
2. *Paul describes himself as a servant of God and an apostle who has been set apart. How is Paul's life a representation of gospel's transforming power? In what ways have you been changed by the power of the gospel?*
3. *What are some big theological ideas that we can know about Christ from these few verses?*