
The Gospel: The Centrality of God

Romans 1:1-17

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FROM THE INTRODUCTION: We need the gospel today. In the midst of a frightful defection from truth that leaves struggling souls with little Godward hope, we need the good news. This is what Romans is all about. Its subject is the gospel, God's good news about God and for fallen men and women, boys and girls.

What we need is the gospel embedded deeply in our souls like a rod of iron that strengthens our spiritual backs. It will hold us upright so that our faces will gaze on God and have enabling grace for salvation, sanctification and serving. So, we take up this study for the glory of God and good of His people.

Romans may well be the most written about book in the New Testament. Commentaries abound. Opinions and differences and shades of understanding run like scattering mice through their pages. The faithful expositor can easily be overwhelmed. To make matters worse, there has been a whole category of study, writing and preaching on Romans that has used words, phrases and sentences as theological springboards. The assumption is that Romans is primarily the *magnum opus* of Pauline theology. I have chosen to seek a different path. I have chosen to take large arcs of text whose words, sentences and paragraphs guide the trajectory of exposition along the path of Paul's purpose. So while there is a value in careful investigation of the leaves, stems and cell structures of the text, I am concerned that we follow the path of the Spirit's thought through the glorious forest of truth.

The theme of Romans is tethered to the opening and closing paragraphs. Paul is set apart for the gospel about Jesus Christ to bring about the obedience of faith among all the people groups. So all glory to the God who establishes believers by the gospel and by Jesus Christ preached among all the people groups leading to the obedience of faith. Then there will be ultimate glory displayed in the wisdom of God through Christ, forever.

We have Paul's main themes - the integrity of gospel committed to him and the solidarity of Jews and Gentiles in the covenant community. (Stott, *Romans*, p.36.) Therefore, the gospel is the good news about the Lord Jesus Christ to all people so that they will believe in an obeying way as the people of God together. Thus, we must learn the gospel (Ch 1-11) and we must live the gospel (Ch 12-16). Why? Because in it the wrath of God, the grace of God, the plan of God and the will of God are revealed through the good news about Jesus Christ.

So come with me, my beloved. Let us run among the mountains of the glory and grace of God on hind's feet in His high places. Let us drink deep of the gospel and be strong in grace. Let us follow the stream that flows through this book till it gathers in torrential power up the near well-spring of our gloriously satisfying Redeemer.

This letter is from Paul, the slave and apostle of God to all the Christians at Rome, Jew and Gentile. He has been called to serve (v.1) and they have been called to salvation (v.6-7). He writes to begin the ministry with them that he intends to do among them when his up-coming trip takes him to Spain, through Jerusalem and Rome. He is on his way to Jerusalem to take

the offering to the church there and to Spain to take the gospel where it has not yet been preached (Romans 15:22-33). He has longed to come to Rome, but has been providentially hindered.

He writes to address the division in the church that has fractured along the lines of the gospel. Outwardly, the division appears to be between Jew and Gentile. However, Paul sees the division as being rooted in wrong thinking about the good news of salvation and the good news of the unity of God's people.

As Paul develops his thesis, he sees Christ as preeminent in the Gospel, the Gentiles as partakers of the Gospel and himself (Paul) as the preacher of the Gospel. In this we can see so clearly Paul's own life and ministry statement. He exists *by grace to proclaim to all the people groups, the centrality and supremacy of Christ in the gospel, so that the obedience of their faith magnifies and glorifies Christ, extending the kingdom and exalting His Name.*

The book of Romans is probably the finest illustration of Lloyd-Jones' comment that preaching ought to be logic on fire. Let us then approach this with a measure of both: a fine attenuation to the flow and a deep appreciation of the fire.

The Integrity of the Gospel

(v.1-7)

The opening paragraph highlights the integrity of the gospel. While it may be misunderstood, misrepresented and even outrightly denied, the gospel is truth. The gospel has been subject, both then and now, to being altered, aborted and abandoned. This is why we must, along with Paul, articulate it and affirm it. So, authenticity of the gospel is at stake.

¹ Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ² which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, ³ concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh ⁴ 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, ⁵ 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, ⁶ including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

⁷ 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.

Flows from the Scripture

(v.1a)

The gospel flows from the Scripture. Yes, it is more clearly revealed on this side of the cross, but it does not come to us as a New Testament novelty. It flows out of the promises and prophecies in the Old Testament. The good news is an exposition and explanation and application, not a discovery. There is a continuity with the Old as well as an unfolding in the New.

Focuses on Christ

(v.1b-4)

The subject of the gospel is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The gospel is about Jesus, who He is and what He has accomplished. Even here, the substance of the message concerning Christ is deeply connected to the Old Testament. The promises and prophecies of the Old Testament culminate in a person. The gospel is about Jesus.

Why is the gospel about Jesus? Because He is who God promised and He has accomplished what God planned. There is a wonderful couplet here:

- Was born a descendent of David in the sphere of the flesh
- Was declared the Son of God with power, in the sphere of the spirit by the resurrection from the dead

Here is the essence of the gospel.

Jesus is deity. He is God's Son.

He became a man. Not just any man. But a man born a descendant of David with all that entails. He is both a Jew and entitled to David's throne. So he was really human and in this world. He also was a part of the old order, the old covenant and the old creation, the flesh (not sinful, just material) as we are.

He died and rose again. He died when he did not deserve to for the sin of others. He was raised from the dead. His resurrection appoints Him the enthroned, crowned Son of God. His resurrection elevated Him to the throne of David in the heavenlies as is indicated in Psalm 2:7 and Acts 2:36; 10:42; 17:31. So He is the sum and substance of the new order, the new covenant and the new creation, the holy realm of the Spirit.

He is Jesus, the Messiah, our Sovereign Lord.

The incarnation marks Jesus as the promised Messiah and Redeemer, so the resurrection marks out Jesus as the exalted King and Ruler. So the gospel is about this unique person, who is both divine and human, humbled and exalted, the man, Jesus, the Messiah, our Lord who owns and rules our lives. (Stott, p.51). "The saving promises to the nation [of Israel] have become a reality in through the true Israel, Jesus the Messiah." (*Romans*, T. Schreiner, p.45).

The gospel is also about this person who stands between the old creation, old era, the limited people of God and the new creation, new era of the Spirit and the universal people of God. His incarnation, his death and resurrection are also the good news that we can be delivered from the old and be brought into the new.

The gospel is also about this One who has been exalted to throne of God by the resurrection and at the ascension as the Lord over all. In Him we are invited to believe, to Him we are summoned to bow and with Him we may live, beginning now and forever.

Foundational for God's People**(v.5-7)**

The source of their authoritative ministry lies in God's enabling grace and appointed office. Jesus Christ has given them and they have received power and position to accomplish the mission of the resurrected Lord. God's people are founded upon the apostolic message and mission, which we have for us today, not in person, but in Scripture.

The primary purpose of this message and mission is to be the instrument through which God's people believe in an obeying way. The gospel about Christ is intended to bring about obedience to Him by those who believe in Him. This theme will constantly unfold throughout the book. What is required in a relationship with God is obedience. And it cannot be a fleshly, legal based obedience. It must be real belief, genuine faith that has obedience as a component. Again, we are confronted with the fact that faith is believing God in an obeying way.

The marvelous scope of the gospel is a calling together into the community of the King of all the people groups. So for Jews it is not a salvation that makes Jews of Gentiles. And for Gentiles, it is a rightful membership in full standing in the community.

The ultimate goal is to spread the fame and reputation of Christ. The gospel is good news about Jesus for the glory of Christ. So while the gospel is to mankind, it is about and for Christ. God's ultimate aim in all things is to glorify Himself and to make Himself the supreme object of satisfaction, to enjoy Himself. As one great preacher has written, "We should be *jealous* (as Scripture sometimes puts it) for the honour of His name - troubled when it remains unknown, hurt when it is ignored, indignant when it is blasphemed, and all the time anxious and determined that it shall be given the hour and glory which are due to it. The highest of all missionary motives is neither obedience to the Great Commission (important as that is), nor love for sinners who are alienated and perishing (strong as that is), but rather zeal - burning and passionate zeal - for the glory of Christ." (Stott, p.53).

The good news is the gospel *of God, about Christ, according to Scripture, for the nations, unto obedience of faith for the sake of the Name.*

The Ministry of the Gospel

(v.8-15)

Paul has two clear purposes in this paragraph. He establishes a relationship with them. He sets forth both his desire to visit them and how that has been hindered. His absence from Rome is not a matter of personal concern but of providence. Further, he models how the integrity of the gospel shapes the ministry of the gospel. He endeavors to lay a blueprint by which he will actually minister through the book itself.

⁸ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. ⁹ For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you ¹⁰ always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. ¹¹ For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— ¹² that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. ¹³ I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. ¹⁴ I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. ¹⁵ So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

In Its Priorities

(v.8-10)

The ministry of gospel is dependent on and empowered by prayer. It is evident from all of Paul's books that he was a man who prayed. No model of ministry then can be complete without prayer, God-ward and people-ward. Paul's prayers in his letters flow from his priorities in ministry.

His prayer is marked by its rejoicing. He is thankful that their faith is being announced all over the world. The gospel he proclaims is effective to save and sanctify people. That it changes lives ought to be a constant source of gladness and gratitude. Notice that his gratitude is two-fold: for them as believers and then for the good news of their faith widely spread. So the life changing power of the gospel is a priority.

His prayer is marked by its requests. He prays for them and for a ministry among them. His life of intense service focuses his prayer in the so far thwarted desires and plans to come. Verse 9 is critical to understanding why this is here at this point. He is serving God with all his might in the gospel. Since this is so, he is determined to minister to them and this letter serves that purpose until it can be face-to-face. Yet his determination is not presumption. His wants are still subject to God's will, not grudgingly, but gladly. So ministry in the gospel with all our might is a priority.

In Its Involvement

(v.11-13)

Paul points to three impart aspects of his involvement and interaction with them in ministry.

He establishes a relationship bond (v.11). He longs to be with them. What he wants to accomplish among them in the gospel for the sake of the Name is a ministry of the heart.

He expects a reciprocal benefit (v.12). They will be established and he will be encouraged. There is mutual effect of sharing their faith and grace. He comes to them on an authoritative basis, but humbly desires that being with them will encourage him as well.

He expresses a resolved purpose (v.13). In spite of being unable to carry through with his plans, he is determined to minister to them. Here is an aspect of gospel ministry that we all must embrace with a sense of reality. We make our plans to accomplish our purposes, while we happily bow to the providences of God. This is part of believing God in an obeying way.

In Its Motivation

(v.14-15)

These two sentences establish a very important connection for us. They help us to see how our duty and desire are to be related, how we respond to God's commands and calling.

Paul speaks first of his duty (v.14). Our translations tend to use the word, obligation. This is not some psychological or emotional debt that is to be paid, but a responsibility arising from his calling, his apostolic office. His calling from God places him in debt to those he has been sent to, whether they are considered culturally (Greek/Non-Greek) or intellectually (wise/ignorant). God has given him a stewardship of the gospel, entrusting him with its riches and treasures. But he is to be a conveyer of those treasures to others. It is not his to keep. Hence, his duty is a debt and an obligation.

His duty is his delight (v.15). Since he has this obligation, this debt, this duty connected to ministry, then he is eager for the opportunity. The NASB tries to capture the sense of the emphatic here, "as for myself." We should hear this like this. "I have a responsibility and (not but) I am most certainly and emphatically eager, ready and willing to preach the gospel to you." This is the Biblical pattern for us. If we understand the gospel, its power, purpose and priority, then our obligations in it are carried out grudgingly, but gladly. If this is not the case, what is required is *repentance*.

The Certainty of the Gospel

(v.16-17)

Both in a negative and positive sense, Paul affirms his confidence in the gospel. His duty and delight in preaching gospel is grounded in the certainties of the gospel. He is eager to preach, not only because of his obligation to the people, but also because of his confidence in its power.

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

The perceptive comment has been made that it is of little use to assert that one is not ashamed if there is little temptation to be ashamed. (Stott, citing James Steward, p.60) All of us want to place our hesitancy in evangelism as a matter of fear. I would suggest that it is rare that the Bible does this. Our unwillingness to share the gospel may well be more the result of being ashamed and embarrassed about what the gospel says. Once again, we must repent and place our confidence in the gospel certainties.

As the Power of God for Salvation

(v.16)

The power for salvation to those who believe is embedded in the gospel. People are saved when the gospel is preached because the gospel is both the message of what God has done to provide salvation and the means/method by which God communicates that salvation. These two elements are critical to our understanding of the power of God for salvation. The message must be clear. The gospel cannot be altered or abandoned or obscured without dire affects for our evangelism. The message of man's sin and God's salvation must be given so that what is heard is what God has done. And the method must be used. Our primary aim in evangelism is to thoroughly good news people. We must be so committed to the message and the method as God's saving power that we become eager to carry out our responsibility.

As the Revelation of God's Righteousness

(v.17)

This theologically dense verse is the second thread of Paul's theme. The reason he is not ashamed of the gospel is that God's righteousness is revealed in it.

Many suggestions are given as to what each of these phrases mean. The diversity and ingenuity of the commentators is stunning and confusing. John Stott's way of synthesizing this was quite persuasive to me.

The righteousness of God here is the character quality of God that actively moves on behalf of men and gives them a right standing with Him. Since this is the anchor for this theme, what is referred to here unfolds through the book and in the gospel. The gospel tells us that there is a just and righteous God before whom we must have a right standing. It also tells us how God can be just and still justify sinners. And the gospel tells us how sinners can receive that righteousness, that right standing before God. So the righteousness of God is an attribute (the way He is), and activity (He comes to our rescue) and an achievement (He bestows a right standing upon us). (Stott, pp. 61-63 for all of the above). Stott summarizes it this way, "The righteousness of God is God's righteous initiative in putting sinners right with Himself, by bestowing on them a righteousness which is not their own, but His.

This righteousness is revealed, that is seen and secured only by faith. It appears that this from (or by) faith to faith is meant as an emphatic. This righteousness solely by faith is certainly a major burden of Paul in Romans.

The quote from Habakkuk 2:4 serves as both the foundation on which the certainty of the gospel rests and the framework for chapters 1-8. It is almost certain that the translation by the ESV is correct: He who is righteous by faith, shall live. The quote places the emphasis upon faith: faith is how righteousness is appropriated and how the community of faith lives. Paul then uses the word faith at least 25 times in chapters 1-4 and life only twice while using the word life 25 times in chapters 5-8 and faith only twice. So the ones who are righteous by faith, Romans 1-4, shall live by faith, Romans 5-8.

So the gospel is God's power to save us and to give us a right standing before God in our salvation and in our sanctification. This is why we must not be ashamed of the gospel and why we must preach the gospel to ourselves every day.

Reflect and Respond

So the gospel is centered on God.

It is God's good news (v.1-7) about Jesus Christ to be proclaimed to all so they will believe in an obeying way.

It is God's good news for and among God's people, central to Biblical ministry, establishing its priorities, purposes and motivations (v.8-15).

It is God's good news about His saving power and revealed righteousness by faith alone to those who believe (v.16-17).

So, do you believe? Do you trust God? Will you believe and bow to the God today?