

“Good News”
Romans 1:1-7
September 11, 2022

INTRODUCTION:

We are beginning a new sermon series today that will take us through Paul’s letter to the Romans in 46 sermons, making it the longest series I have ever done. This number of sermons pales in comparison to the attention given this book by some preachers. The famous Donald Grey Barnhouse, pastor of the historic Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, preached 251 sermons on Romans, a series that required almost twenty years because of Barnhouse’s extensive travel schedule that took him away from Philadelphia for months at a time.

Such attention is well-deserved. Romans is arguably the most influential letter ever written. The salvation of Martin Luther and the ensuing Protestant Reformation can be traced to the teachings found in this book. The Wesley brothers, John and Charles, trace their faith to Romans as well. The Swiss commentator Godet claims that every movement of revival in the history of the Christian church has been connected with the teachings we find here. Its influence can also be traced back to the ancient church and such important figures as St. Augustine. One of the greatest preachers of the early church, Chrysostom, had this book read to him twice a week. If I may speak personally, I can report that my own coming to faith in Christ as an eighteen-year-old college freshman was due to a study of this book. The New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce says that Paul’s letter to the Romans should come with a warning, because there is no telling what may happen to those who study it. We’re going to find out over the coming months. We begin today with its introduction and three ideas that dominate it.

I. The Good News – v. 1

Romans is a letter, and it follows the pattern of letters written at that time. This pattern is different from our own custom. Ancient letters such as this one begin with the name of the author, then move to the recipient, a greeting and then the body of the letter. So the outline here would basically be “Paul, to the Christians at Rome, grace and peace to you.” That is the pattern we encounter, but with one slight alteration that makes this letter unique. Paul expands on himself for six verses. Since he comes with an important message from God, it is important that he establish himself as a reliable messenger, and that is the purpose of these first six verses. He begins by explaining that he is a servant of Christ and called to be an apostle. And then the next phrase introduces his

readers to a theme that will dominate the entire letter. Paul is **“set apart for the gospel of God.”**

As you’re probably aware, the word gospel means good news. I fear that this idea of good news has lost something of its punch in our cynical age. When someone tells us that they have good news, our response is often, “What’s the catch?” You get a letter in the mail that says, “Good news; we have \$125,000 for you.” And there it is, a check made payable to you in that amount. Upon closer inspection, though, you see that this is only a solicitation to borrow money from them. It was merely masquerading as good news in order to manipulate you to do something you would likely regret.

Is the good news of the gospel just an attempt to manipulate a person to do something they don’t really want to do and will likely regret? The original Greek word was often used at this time for the good news of victory in battle. An army invades your homeland. If the invaders succeed, it will mean taking from you and your family both your property and your freedom. Your king sends out his army to defend the homeland, and everyone is on pins and needles anxiously awaiting news of the battle. And then it comes. A messenger is seen riding swiftly on horseback. Will he bring news of defeat or of victory? Everyone comes out to meet him. He reigns in his horse and announces the joyful news, “Our army prevailed; the invaders have been turned back. We are safe.”

This is the sense of the good news of the gospel, with one difference. The threat we face, and from which we are delivered, is not an invading army. Rather, it is the result of our own mutiny against our Creator. The whole human race, in the sin of Adam, has positioned itself as God’s enemy. And since he is far more powerful, if we face the wrath our mutiny deserves, we are doomed. The good news that Paul will announce throughout this letter is that God has taken the initiative, at great cost to himself, to bring peace. He comes to us in peace, bringing reconciliation instead of warfare. Proverbs 25:25 says, **“Like cold water to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country.”**

II. About Jesus – v. 2-4

This good news of peace and reconciliation with God is made possible through Jesus. The gospel concerning Jesus was not an attempt of church leaders like Paul to put the best spin on the tragic crucifixion of Jesus. Rather, it was **“promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures”** (v. 2). He’s referring to the Old Testament prophets.

Paul then tells us two things about this Jesus who is at the center of God’s good news. First, he is **“descended from David according to the flesh”** (v. 3). God had promised to David that the reign of his house, meaning his family, would endure forever. Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise. He is the son of

David in a literal sense, and also Israel's true King who will reign forever. He is the King not only of the literal nation of Israel, but also of the spiritual nation of Israel, the Church.

The second thing Paul tells us of Jesus is that he **“was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead”** (v. 4). The language is a little difficult to follow here, but the basic meaning is that Jesus launches the new age of the Spirit, an age that began with his resurrection from the dead. That event was a powerful demonstration that the corrosive effects of sin were now beginning to be removed, including the removal of the great enemy of death.

If we remove all the modifying statements, we are left with this basic meaning of verses 2-4. The gospel of God concerns his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. The good news is not that if you try hard you can live your best life now. The good news is not that God will enable all your dreams to come true. The good news is not even that we have a reliable guide now on how we can live. There may be some element of truth in all those statements, but the good news of the gospel is far better news than anything those statements may communicate. God has sent his Son, Jesus, to fight a battle on our behalf, and he has prevailed. As a result of his victory, restoration to God's original design for us is possible. Just as in Adam's sin and failure all was lost to the human race, now in Jesus' victory all can be restored to the human race. It was a costly victory, costly for God, because it required the death of his own Son. But through that death and resurrection, true freedom is once more possible. John Stott expresses that freedom powerfully.

Human beings are born in sin and slavery, but ...Jesus Christ came to set us free. For here is unfolded the good news of freedom, freedom from the holy wrath of God upon all ungodliness, freedom from alienation into reconciliation, freedom from the condemnation of God's law, freedom from what Malcolm Muggeridge used to call 'the dark little dungeon of our own ego', freedom from the fear of death, freedom one day from the decay of the groaning creation into the glorious liberty of God's children, and meanwhile freedom from ethnic conflict in the family of God, and freedom to give ourselves to the loving service of God and others. (p. 19)

III. That Changes Everything – v. 5-7

This gospel that Paul has been appointed to proclaim is immensely powerful. It accomplishes what God intends it to accomplish, which Paul describes in verse 5. The gospel will **“bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations.”** It is important to understand what is meant by this phrase “the obedience of faith,” since this is what Paul says the gospel is intended to accomplish. It can be taken in two basic ways. It can mean the obedience that consists in believing, or the obedience that comes

from believing. While both of those are true and biblical, I think the second one more closely captures Paul's meaning. The translators of the NIV thought so too, translating this phrase, "obedience that comes from faith." The Bible is clear that we are saved by faith alone, apart from the works of obedience. But it is also clear that we are saved by faith unto obedience. In other words, the faith that saves us also begins to change us from the inside out so that we want to obey God. Since the aim of the gospel is this obedience of faith, let's look more carefully at each component of that phrase, beginning with obedience.

Do you remember the first lie ever told? It was when Satan told Eve about God's command not to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree, **"You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil"** (Gen. 3:4-5). What destruction that lie has brought upon us all! And it is a lie that is still being told. The lie is that obeying God will deprive you of things that you should rightfully have. Obedience to God will limit you and diminish you. The good life comes from asserting your will, not from submitting your will to God. Don't we all have experience with this lie, believing that our life will be better if we live it the way we want to live it instead of the way God directs us?

While it is true that obeying God limits our lives, these limits serve to free us to be who God intends us to be. In the limits of obedience to God can be found true joy and the fulfillment of who and what we were intended to be. Obedience to God limits us like the train tracks limit the train. If we could personify the train, imagine a train crossing our country and noticing all the beautiful scenery it passes. It sees the beautiful forests of the east coast, the pleasant plains in the middle of our country and the majestic Rocky mountains in the west. The train says to itself, "these tracks are so limiting. I want to go and explore the lands I've been passing through." So the train leaves the tracks to go off on its own. The outcome, of course, is not a happy one. Instead of the freedom to go anywhere and do anything, the train discovers the hard way that the tracks he thought of as so limiting were actually what freed him to be what he was intended to be.

As we are going to see as we get further into this letter, the situation with all of us is that we have gotten off the tracks. But that's not our only problem. Just as a derailed train cannot get itself back on the tracks, so we are unable to put ourselves right again. Even worse, we don't even want to get back on the tracks, viewing them as our enemy instead of our friend. What hope is there for us? That's where this second word, the word "faith," gives such good news. The change so desperately needed comes not from within, but from without. It comes from God, and not us. If you're feeling stuck in life, or feeling that you've made a mess of things, and you don't quite know how to set things right again, there is good news in this word faith. Your need is to stop trusting yourself and instead to trust in what God has done through Jesus. This is one of the major themes of this letter.

There is a beautiful example of this kind of transformation in the very first verse of this letter. Paul describes himself as **“a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle.”** Don’t miss the fact that the very first thing Paul says about himself is that he is a servant of Christ Jesus. A servant is one who submits his will to the will of his master. It is a title of humility. Paul formerly thought that Jesus was a problem to be erased, and now there has been such a transformation that he gladly embraces the role of servant to Jesus.

But then notice the next thing Paul says of himself. He is **“called to be an apostle.”** The apostles were the leaders of the church, given authority by Jesus himself. There were only twelve of them, and they occupied an elite place in the early church. Paul was bold enough to recognize and accept this as a calling from God. So here we have the presence of both humility and boldness with Paul. It is the gospel that gives both of these. It gives us humility to doubt ourselves in all the ways we should doubt ourselves. But then it also gives us confidence, not in ourselves, but in what God is making of us.

Isn’t this what we want for ourselves and for our children? We want our children to grow up to be humble servants. But we also want them to be confident men and women, recognizing and accepting the gifts God has given them and the calling he has placed upon them. It is the gospel that gives this, humbling us as sinners, but then rescuing us by the love of God.

CONCLUSION:

Verse 7 concludes this morning’s passage with Paul’s statement of the recipients of the letter and his greeting to them. He is writing **“to all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints.”** If you think about it, there is precious little you will be able to take with you upon your death. Money, accomplishments, and awards will be left behind. In just a few years after death, most of us will be remembered by only a few people. What will last into eternity is what Paul says of these Christians in Rome. They are loved by God and called to be saints.

As a result of being loved by God and called to be saints, they experience this common Christian greeting of grace and peace. May your hearts be filled with all grace and peace in believing this gospel that we will be considering through the coming year!

Discussion Questions
Romans 1:1-7

1. Do you have a favorite part of Paul's letter to the Romans that God has used in a significant way in your life?
2. Romans is all about the gospel, which means good news. Do you ever struggle to experience the gospel as good news? What do you think is the cause of such struggles?
3. John Stott says that part of the good news of the gospel is the way it brings freedom to us. Which of the freedoms in the following Stott quote is particularly meaningful for you?

Human beings are born in sin and slavery, but ...Jesus Christ came to set us free. For here is unfolded the good news of freedom, freedom from the holy wrath of God upon all ungodliness, freedom from alienation into reconciliation, freedom from the condemnation of God's law, freedom from what Malcolm Muggeridge used to call 'the dark little dungeon of our own ego', freedom from the fear of death, freedom one day from the decay of the groaning creation into the glorious liberty of God's children, and meanwhile freedom from ethnic conflict in the family of God, and freedom to give ourselves to the loving service of God and others. (p. 19)

4. It was pointed out in the sermon that the phrase "the obedience of faith" has the meaning of obedience that comes from faith. How does believing the gospel help us obey?
5. Can you apply this phrase "the obedience of faith"? In other words, is there some area in your life right now where you are struggling to obey God? How would believing the gospel empower greater obedience?
6. Paul begins this letter by identifying himself as both a servant of Christ Jesus and one is called to be an apostle. These two roles are roles of humility (a servant) and boldness (an apostle). The gospel had produced in Paul these qualities. Are there ways you need to grow in either humility or boldness?