



The Gospel (Romans 1:1-17)

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The first of a series of expositions on Romans 1-3

Paul begins his letter to the Roman church with an introduction which is characteristic of his style, but which in this case is much longer and more detailed than usual. After mentioning very briefly that he is a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, he launches straight into the substance of his mission – to preach to the world the Gospel of God, the Good News of man's salvation in Christ. In this context the opening line is important mainly for the way in which it outlines Paul's credentials for this ministry. First of all, he tells us how he is related to God. Paul sees himself as bound, hand and foot, (the word 'servant' implies slavery) to his master, Jesus Christ. What Christ commands, Paul must fulfil, because of this permanent relationship established between them.

This is a very important point which we cannot overlook, because it is the key to everything that follows. Paul's aptitude and suitability for service depends on his prior relationship to Jesus, who is in control of his life. So often Christians want to do great things for God, but they forget this little point. Submission to his will is not an optional extra, nor is it something which we can be left to discover as we go along. It is the first condition for service, and unless it is true in our lives we shall never be used by Christ as Paul was. We can prepare ourselves by studying, we can pile up doctorates, books, techniques and experiences of many different kinds, but if our hearts are not obedient, if we are serving our own interests and not those of Christ, our faith is vain and our service is of no account whatsoever.

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It is the servant of Jesus Christ who is called to be an apostle. This choice of career was not dictated by natural ability, nor did it owe anything to the 'old boy network', which exerts such a powerful hold on so many sectors of church work today. Paul did not get where he was because he knew the right people, nor because he had what it takes to be a successful evangelist. If his own testimony is to be believed, he would never have got anywhere on that basis. Paul was what he was because God had chosen him, and this sense of calling is fundamental to his whole understanding of God's work. Paul knew that he could offer himself as a servant, but he also realised that he could not deter-

mine the conditions of his service. As it was, he was chosen for a very important role, but one in which he was forced to pay a correspondingly high price - unable to marry, of no fixed abode, constantly on the move, slandered even by some of his own converts, beaten, tortured, and finally - if the ancient tradition is reliable - executed for the Gospel which no power on earth could prevent him from preaching. The servant is not greater than his master, and Paul too, like Jesus, found that his calling was marked by suffering and sealed finally in blood.

In being called to be an apostle, Paul was being called to share the authority which Jesus had given to the eleven disciples after his resurrection - to preach and to teach. In this respect, Paul's calling was unique because it came later and quite unexpectedly. But why? Paul himself tells us that he was specially chosen to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles, to those people who did not belong to the nation of Israel. For better or for worse, the other apostles were all Jews from Palestine, who preferred to stay with their own people as much as they could. John may have ventured outside his home environment, and Peter was persuaded to preach the Gospel to the Roman soldier Cornelius, but that is not quite the same thing as launching a missionary movement to the Gentile world! That task fell on Paul, whose special calling was apparently recognised by his fellow apostles as early as 48 or 49.

For when Paul tells us that he has been set aside for the Gospel, there can be no doubt as to what he had in mind. This was his mission - to expound the teaching of Christ in such a way as to make it abundantly clear that Gentiles, as well as Jews, are entitled to a share in the Kingdom of God. Paul ranges very widely in his use and interpretation of the Old Testament, but his systematic exposition of the meaning of the covenant which God made with Abraham, however great its interest and importance for us, has essentially this one thing in mind. It is when we begin to understand this that we can start to unravel the meaning of the Epistle as a whole, and appreciate just why Paul wrote in the way he did.

It is characteristic of his whole approach to the subject that Paul should think in historical terms first. The Gospel which he has been given to proclaim is not new. On the contrary, it is part of the very essence, if not *the* very essence, of the most ancient form of Judaism. The Gospel was in fact first proclaimed by the prophets, who left their message in Holy Scripture. In saying this, Paul is picking up one of the most central points of Jesus's own teaching about the Old Testament. This is that the sacred book of the Jews is really a kind of advance message, given by God to his chosen people, to tell them in advance about the coming of Christ. It is not realised often enough that much of the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders of his time con-

cerned the different ways in which they interpreted their common heritage. The Jews interpreted the Word of God in terms of their law, seeking always to update and to extend it by applying it ever more strictly to every conceivable situation. Eventually the work of the rabbis would be codified in the Mishnah and in the Talmud, giving later Judaism a body of law which, for practical purposes, would be more important than the Old Testament itself.

Jesus, on the other hand, interpreted the Word of God in terms of himself. He was not afraid to say that the Scriptures spoke of him, and on at least one famous occasion he demonstrated this at great length (Luke 24:27). Paul was of the same opinion as Jesus in his understanding of the Scriptures, and his previous training among the rabbis gave him a first-hand awareness of just what the differences between them were. However much Paul may have adapted his message to the needs of his audience, or even relied on techniques learned from his Jewish teachers, there can be no doubt that on the essential point he had made the transition which placed him squarely on the side of Jesus in any theological debate. In recognising this, we also learn one essential fact about Christian interpretation of the Bible. If we are truly followers of Jesus, then we must read the Old Testament as he read it, and learn to interpret it through his eyes. Unless we do this, we cannot really understand the Gospel, which we are in danger of cutting off from its roots in the history of Israel.

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It is this essentially biblical (*i.e.* Old Testament) perspective which explains the rather curious phrasing used in verses 3 and 4. At first sight it looks as if Jesus, in Paul's understanding, was a man who, after his resurrection from the dead, was somehow appointed to be the Son of God. This impression is created on first reading because Paul is thinking here primarily in terms of the way the Gospel has been revealed *to us* - first, in the writings of the prophets, then in the life and ministry of Jesus, and finally in Christ's exaltation. But although this clearly follows the historical sequence of events, we must be very careful not to attach too much theological meaning to it. Paul's expression at the beginning of verse 3 makes it plain that he knows that the Son existed and dwelt with the Father before his incarnation. Even his birth from the 'seed of David' is contained within the wider framework of divine Sonship. The difference which the resurrection made was that Jesus was then revealed as the Son of God *in power*, no longer limited to the weakness of the flesh, but charged with the Spirit of holiness (*i.e.* the Holy Spirit), to reign in glory over the Kingdom given to him by the Father. The resurrection altered the scope of Jesus' authority; it did not change his essential relationship with God the Father.

Next, we move on to the specific conditions of Paul's own appointment. It was from the risen Christ, already reigning in glory, that Paul received his apostolic commission. Doubtless, this added additional weight to his assertion that he was sent to the Gentiles, since while he was still on earth Jesus confined himself largely to Jews, as did the other apostles. It was only in the light of Pentecost that the revelation to the nations was openly proclaimed, and Paul's calling came in the light of that. Once more, Paul emphasises the priority of his spiritual state over his missionary service; it is because he first received grace that he was then able to receive the call to evangelise as well.

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It is extremely interesting to note that there are three things which Paul singles out as being particularly characteristic of his mission. First, there is faith, then there is obedience, then there is the honour of the name of Christ. The priority given to faith is due to the fact that this is the word used to describe the kind of relationship which we are meant to have with God in Christ. It is an unfortunate characteristic of our language that we have tended to restrict the scope of this word, so that to us it means primarily belief in a series of doctrines concerning the teaching of the Bible. Naturally, that is a part of faith, and we must never seek to minimise its importance. But it is really a reduction of faith to its intellectual aspect only, whereas in reality faith embraces much more than that. For one thing, it includes *trust*, the practical commitment which is willing to surrender the direction of one's life to another - Jesus Christ. It sounds easy, and at first it probably is, at least for most people. But as time goes on, and Jesus digs deeper into us, the challenge to surrender becomes harder. We may give God an hour a week each Sunday, but can he have our whole lives? We may tithe our earnings, but can he have every penny we own? The questions get harder as we go along!

Paul hits the nail right on the head when he says that the first fruit of faith is obedience. This is the key to successful outworking of the principle in practical terms. At first, God may ask us to do only relatively small things, and this may disappoint us if we are young and enthusiastic in the faith. Yet it is one of the ironies of life that the small things are often the hardest to do in practice. We may be prepared to make a grand gesture in support of God, but not to persevere in routine matters when there is little glory or recognition to be gained.

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We may feel that what we have been asked to do is not big enough to be worth bothering about and so we forget it, persuad-

ing ourselves that it is better to conserve our energies for something more important later on. Yet the message of the Bible is that God wants our obedience, not sacrifice. The grand gesture may be just a form of showing off, totally unrelated to God's will for our lives. Is that what he wants? We may have our sights firmly set on a career in Christian circles, with power and influence radiating from a strategic base in some big church or organisation. Does that bring glory to God?

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When Paul calls us to a life of obedience, he is not thinking in terms of worldly glory or success. On the contrary, the truly obedient Christian may just have to keep his head down and get on with the work, without any reward in this life at all. He may well find that the big churches, the universities and the Christian organisations are closed to him, and that he must be content to hoe a far more modest portion of the Lord's vineyard. But God does not see these things as men see them, and he does not care about human forms of recognition or achievement. The Creator of heaven and earth is not likely to be impressed by a long-service medal or by a university degree! These things have their place, but the real hallmark of true Christian ministry is obedience, in faith, to the Word and the commands of God.

Finally, Paul tells us that the reason for this is that true faith and true obedience must bring honour and glory to the name of Jesus. Once again, we are faced with the problem that our language has reduced the rich biblical concept of the name to that of a fairly meaningless label. In the Bible, the name of Jesus is not just a convenient way of referring to him – it is a hallmark of his power, his authority and his purpose in the overall plan of God. To bring honour to his name is therefore to make these things prominent in our lives and in the lives of those around us. Drawing attention to ourselves is therefore the very last thing we should be doing!

Paul concludes his opening section by reminding the Romans that they too are called to share in the rich experience of Christ's grace and peace. Here we see clearly just how it is that all Christians are alike, and also how it is that we differ from each other. We have already noticed that Paul distinguishes clearly between what he is called to *be* and what he is called to *do*. Now he repeats what he is called to be and applies that to the Romans as well. The grace and peace of God are for all Christians, and we dare not rest content if there are any in our fellowship who are not enjoying the fruits of these in their lives. But at the same time, we are not all called to do the same things! Elsewhere, Paul outlines different types of ministry to which members of the church may be called, and he urges believers to respect one another in this (I Corinthians 12). Here he does not go into details, but leaves the nature of service open. This is both wise and realistic. God does not tell Paul what he wants others to do – he tells each one individually. If someone comes up to us with

the news that we are being called to this or that, we can feel fairly sure that they are wrong, unless we also hear God telling us the same thing! On the other hand, if God is telling us something, we must be prepared to submit it to the judgement of the church, to see whether it is really coming from him or is just the prompting of our own subconscious imagination!

After the initial words of greeting, Paul goes on to examine the state of the Roman church. He is thankful to God that the faith of this church is held up as an example all over the world. As inhabitants of the imperial capital, the Roman Christians were especially liable to be noticed, since so many people would be passing through on business of one kind or another. Yet the privilege of being at the centre of things also carried a great responsibility – a bad report on Rome would probably have circulated even more widely! Today the same principle still applies, though perhaps in a slightly different way. We hear little of the millions of faithful American Christians who go about their everyday lives in peace, but the misdeeds of a television evangelist hit the headlines all over the world. It is really very dangerous to be in such a prominent position! The worst part of it is that the faith of many thousands of humble, innocent people can be ridiculed and fall into disrepute because of the indiscretions of one or two people in the limelight. The Roman church did not have television to call to its aid, but in the conditions of the ancient world, it occupied the most prominent and exposed position, which Paul must have realised perfectly well.

Rather than ask God to bless his decisions, Paul went down on his knees to seek God's will first

Paul is not merely thankful for the church's faithful witness, however. He goes on to add that the church is constantly in his prayers, and that he longs to be able to travel to Rome himself, to share his vision of the Gospel with believers there. Notice how he commends himself to the Romans (verse 9). Once again, he describes his own service to God, first in terms of personal submission and then in terms of his call to action. He worships God in his spirit, as Jesus commanded us to do (see John 4:24), and also in the Gospel of his Son, which includes his preaching work among the Gentiles. But notice too, that Paul submits his desire to go to Rome to God in prayer. It would probably have been fairly easy for him to have got on a ship and gone to Rome off his own bat, perhaps with a prayer or two before setting off. But that is not the way Paul set about ordering his affairs. Rather than ask God to bless his decisions, Paul went down on his knees to seek God's will first. At the time he wrote this letter, he was already deeply anxious to be able to go to Rome, but God had not yet opened the way for him to get there. Paul does not explain how he knew this, but he does at least leave it in no doubt that he understood the difference between his own desires and God's plan for his life. The fact that he was writing at this point, and not making his way to Rome in person, tells us too, which of these things had the upper hand in his life.

Next, Paul explains why he is so eager to visit the Romans, and incidentally reveals to us what the real purpose and joy of Christian fellowship is. First, he wants to see them in order to be

able to share with them the spiritual gift which God has given to him. Paul's first thought is that if he goes to Rome he will go to give. He does not want to be a charge on the Romans, nor does he want to keep God's blessings to himself. Nothing is more indicative of his spiritual maturity and independence than his willingness to share with others, secure in the knowledge that he will not thereby lose what he already has. On the contrary, Paul knows that if he goes in order to give, he will also receive from the members of the church there. Fellowship in the Gospel is always a two-way street, and Paul was not too proud to recognise that he too would want to receive from those whose calling was perhaps not quite the same as his. Once again, we see that it is the common relationship to Jesus which takes priority over everything else. Paul valued the fellowship that he would find at Rome, and knew that it would be essential for him if his mission to the Gentiles was to bear fruit there.

For ultimately it is the sense of mission which is the most powerful impulse driving Paul to Rome. He would not have gone to the capital simply to join a holy huddle, or to draw on the spiritual resources of the existing community. His vision was for outreach and expansion beyond what had already been achieved. The Jewish Christians of Rome had evidently made inroads into the Gentile community, but now it was time to reach out farther still, to bring the Gospel to other lands to the west. It must have seemed to the Roman Christians that such a task was beyond their resources. Many of them were preoccupied with their own national and commercial interests, and probably had little vision for reaching out beyond them. Yet they had the strength and the opportunity to do just that, and it was in order to galvanize them in that direction that Paul sat down to write this Epistle.

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Paul's weapon for breaking through to those outside the church was a simple one – the Gospel of Christ. He did not waste time on secondary matters, but went straight to the heart of the matter – the Gospel, which was the power of God. It is not that he was indifferent to local customs and culture, but he realised that things of that kind could be dealt with later. A church can only wrestle with the problem of becoming indigenous after it has heard and accepted the Gospel, since without the Gospel there would be no church at all! The only qualification needed to become a Christian is faith, and it is on this basis that Paul bases his plea for continuing evangelism. He recognises that God has chosen to work among the nations in a particular order, going first to the Jews and then to the Greeks. But what unites them now is a common experience and confession of faith, which they recognise in, and share with, one another. It is this faith, not national or cultural origin, which puts them both back in the right relationship with God, and which in time will do the same for the other nations as well.

In saying that the righteous will live by faith, Paul is merely repeating what the Old Testament prophets had already proclaimed (Habakkuk 2:4). In other words, he was reminding the Romans that even if it might appear that God worked primarily

through national or cultural communities, the basis of the Gospel message was still the same. A Jew could not rely on his national identity for salvation and never could have done, even in Old Testament times. It was this understanding of Israel's history which had been obscured in the passage of time. Defeat and subjugation to a series of foreign rulers had given the Jews a false sense of pride in the one thing which their neighbours could not take away from them – their religion. In the Roman world, that was what set them apart, and made it so difficult for them to think in terms of sharing their faith with others.

Yet sadly, this inward-looking attitude had produced stagnation and death at the heart of Israel, which had come to rely on pride rather than on faith for its sense of identity. Paul understood this well because he had once shared the very same attitudes. But when God opened his eyes to the reality of faith, he came to understand that national pride was a snare which prevented the Gospel from reaching those in need of salvation. Faith, not cultural inheritance, is the true foundation of the church, and it is in the light of this fact that Paul begins his masterly exposition of the Gospel at work in human history.

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