

ROMANS – Study 1: Introduction (1:1-17)

Key verses: *I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes; first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith” (1:16-17)*

Introduction: the impact of Romans

In 386 AD, **Augustine of Hippo**, a teacher of rhetoric, received assurance of salvation after reading Romans 13:13-14. The challenge to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” struck him so forcefully that “it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled”. He later became one of the greatest Latin speaking Fathers of the church, and his theology has impacted the church immensely.

In 1515 AD, **Martin Luther**, a devout Augustinian monk and professor of Bible at Wittenberg University, began to teach from the book of Romans. Luther struggled with the meaning of Romans 1:17, where Paul says that the gospel reveals “righteousness” from God. He later wrote, “Night and day I pondered until ... I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby, through grace and sheer mercy, he justifies us by faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise... This passage of Paul became to me a gateway into heaven”. Luther went on to be one of the great lights of the Protestant Reformation.

In 1738, **John Wesley**, an ordained Anglican clergyman who had recently returned disillusioned from a failed mission trip to Georgia, attended a meeting in London where he heard a reading from Martin Luther’s book about Romans. Wesley was profoundly affected by the experience, and wrote, “About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death”.

In 1918, theologian **Karl Barth** published his commentary on Romans. He had been trained in liberal theology, which looked for the improvement of society through the efforts of mankind, but the bleakness of Paul’s description of mankind in Romans 1:18 onwards convinced him that man is utterly sinful and absolutely dependent on God’s sovereign grace for salvation.

W5 of Romans

Who? Written by Paul, a servant (*doulos* – slave) of Christ and called to be an apostle. He was formerly a Pharisee (set apart for the Law), but is now set apart for the Gospel; Written to Christians in Rome (verse 7). Paul has two names because he has two cultural identities – his Jewish name is Saul; Paul is his Roman name (his name was not changed!)

Where? Recipients are in Rome (centre of Empire – Paul has not been to this church in person, verse 10; 15:23); Paul is probably in Corinth (he is in the house of Gaius according to 16:23, the name of a man he baptised in Corinth according to 1 Corinthians 1:14, and his companions are the same as when he was in Greece – compare 16:21-23 with Acts 19:22; 20:2-4).

When? Around 55 AD. Paul has already been a Christian and a missionary for around 20 years.

Why? There are several clues in the letter as to what Paul’s concerns were:

- His comments about plans to visit Rome (1:13; 15:22-24).
- The implications of his gospel for the role of the Jews in God’s plan (chapters 2, 4, 9-11 focus much on the Jews).
- His concerns about false teachers (16:17-19)
- His reference to problems concerning relationships between ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ Christians (14:1-15:13).
- His plans for a mission to Spain (15:24).
- His desire for the prayerful support of the Roman Christians (15:30-32).

These clues have led to a number of suggested reasons for the letter:

- *To present Paul’s fully developed core gospel in universal terms* – Paul universalises some things he had written about in specific circumstances in earlier letters and this is certainly the most complete record of his teaching (his “*last will and testament*”, Bornkamm). But, why would he write this to the church in Rome? Also, the letter is weak on Christology (teaching about the person of Christ) compared to Colossians, weak on the resurrection compared to 1 Corinthians, weak on the church compared to Ephesians and weak on eschatology (the end times) compared to 1 Thessalonians. This is far from a complete presentation of Paul’s teaching.
- *A circular letter* – some manuscripts lack the words “*in Rome*” in 1:7 and 1:15, and it has been suggested that chapters 15-16 were added to the copy of a 14 chapter letter destined for Rome, with other copies going to other churches. It just happens that the version that was preserved was the Roman one. But, this does not do justice to the personal tone of 1:8-15.
- *Jewish and Gentile Christians* – some scholars see the key issue as tension between Christians from a Jewish background and those who are Gentiles (perhaps because of the expelling of Jews from Rome mentioned in Acts 18:2 and their subsequent return). They suggest that 14:1 to 15:13 is a key section, with the weaker brothers being Jewish believers and the stronger brothers being Gentiles. There is, however, little evidence for any division on these grounds in the church in Rome (Paul never mentions division or warring factions) and he addresses the church as Gentiles (1:5-6, 13; 15:15-16).
- *A dialogue with Judaism* – Some scholars have suggested that Romans was primarily intended as a defence of Christianity in the face of Jewish critics. It is true that Paul answers many questions that Jews might ask about his gospel, but the letter is addressed to Roman Christians, not to Jewish sceptics.

- *Preparation for a visit to gain support for his future planned mission to Spain* – this idea finds support in the letter itself (1:11-15; 15:24). Paul may have written the letter to let the church in Rome know what his gospel was and to show them that he was ‘orthodox’ (perhaps because of slanderous reports about his teaching – see 3:8). Perhaps he intended to transfer his base from Antioch to Rome as his mission shifted from the East to the West. This is undoubtedly part of the reason for the letter, but we cannot be sure what other reasons he may have had.

What? Whatever the purpose of the letter, it is certainly true that Romans is less concerned with local issues than any of Paul’s other letters, and that it is the most complete presentation of the gospel he preached. Interestingly, Paul calls it the “*Gospel of God*” (1:1). The word “*God*” is by far the predominant word in Romans (Leon Morris points out that it occurs once every 46 words), and this letter is all about God and His good news message.

Course Outline

Week 1 – Introduction (1:1-17)

THE GOSPEL OF GOD

Week 2 – The problem (1:18-3:20)

Week 3 – The solution (3:21-4:25)

Week 4 – New security and identity (5:1-21)

Week 5 – New freedom (6:1-7:25)

Week 6 – New power and hope (8:1-39)

Week 7 – The context (9-11)

THE OBEDIENCE THAT COMES FROM FAITH

Week 8 – Our core response and transformation (12:1-16)

Week 9 – A transformed view of the world (12:17-13:14)

Week 10 – A transformed way of disagreeing (14:1-13)

Week 11 – Closing words (15:14-16:27)

The Gospel of God

“I am not ashamed of the gospel” (verse 16)

Paul’s life has been devoted to this gospel message for the past 20 years of his life. His whole-hearted service for God constitutes spreading the message (verse 9) and he can still say after everything he has endured for its sake that he is “*not ashamed*” of it (verse 16). As William Barclay says:

Paul had been imprisoned in Philippi, chased out of Thessalonica, smuggled out of Berea, laughed at in Athens. He has preached in Corinth where his message was foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling-block to the Jews, and out of that background Paul declared that he was proud of the gospel.

Deficient views of the gospel

- **A ‘social gospel’** – the idea that the message is primarily about changing society. It will do that (see chapters 12 onwards), but only as it transforms the lives of individuals who become transformers of society. The heart of the gospel is the spiritual salvation of people. That is where its power lies!
- **A narrow view of the gospel** – there can be a tendency to narrow the meaning of gospel to a few propositional truths that are relevant for non-Christians (e.g. ‘four spiritual laws’ or ‘gospel meetings’). Although these summaries may be helpful, the gospel is much more than that. It is not just the ABC of Christianity; it is the A to Z. It includes all of Scripture (even the Old Testament!) and it is relevant to Christians (Paul wants to preach the gospel to believers in Rome according to verse 15) as it can strengthen and establish us (16:25). We never outgrow the gospel!

The gospel ...

In this opening section we learn some important principles about Paul’s gospel, each of which raises a question Paul will answer:

- 1) **Was promised beforehand** (verse 2). It fulfills the prophecies of the Old Testament (“*Holy Scriptures*”). Paul’s gospel is not some novel idea that he invented, but the continuation of the story of God’s plan of salvation throughout Scripture.

Q. How does the gospel fulfill the Old Testament? Where is the connection? Paul will answer this in chapter 4

- 2) **Is all about Jesus** (verses 3-4). The identity of Christ is central to the gospel. He is fully human (a descendant of David) and fully God (His divinity was powerfully declared by the ultimate sign-miracle, His resurrection). Therefore we can call Him “*Jesus Christ our Lord*”!

Q. Why does it depend so fully on Jesus? How did He reveal God’s righteousness? The answer will come in chapter 3.

- 3) **Calls people to faith and obedience** (verse 5). The gospel has at its core a call to repentance. We are rebellious and disobedient and God calls us to obedience. This obedience comes by faith. True faith and repentance cannot be separated. Repentance is not just turning away from sin, but also turning towards God, and that involves faith. And we cannot truly have faith in God

without turning away from our own rebellious trust in ourselves. Faith is the **only** principle that makes God's righteousness applicable to our lives.

Q. What does this "obedience that comes from faith" look like in our daily lives? 12:1-15:13 draws out the implications.

- 4) **Is about saving people** (verse 16). The gospel is good news, but to realise we need the good news we must understand the bad news first. We need to be saved – we are in great danger and we are powerless to save ourselves.

Q. What do we need to be saved from? This is the central concern of 1:18-3:20.

- 5) **Is powerful** (verse 16). The gospel is not just about historical facts, but present power to save. It is not about helping us find the power inside ourselves or even empowering us, but a demonstration of God's power to transform us.

Q. What difference does this power of God make in our lives? Paul will explain this in chapters 5-8.

- 6) **Applies to ALL people** (verse 16). The gospel has universal application – to Jews and Gentiles. It came first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles, but it is a message for both. It transcends all cultural and ethnic divides.

Q. What are the implications of this gospel for God's purpose for Israel? Chapters 9-11 deal with this concern.

- 7) **Reveals God's righteousness through faith** (verse 17). The gospel both demonstrates that God is righteous (it shows His character) and is the means of making sinful people righteous. Righteousness means to be in a right relationship with God – a righteous person is acceptable to Him, as if they had no sin. The mystery of the gospel is that it makes sinful people righteous, not by their own effort or because they earn it, but because God's righteousness is revealed in them.

Q. What is the nature of saving faith? Paul deals with this issue in 3:27-4:25.

- 8) **Is a message that must be declared** (verses 5, 9, 14-15) – Paul's calling is as an apostle, to preach the message of the gospel. This is his all-consuming passion. Paul's particular calling and apostleship is to take this message to the Gentiles.

Q. How will Paul continue his apostolic mission of spreading the gospel? This is the concern of 15:14-33.

"The righteous will live by faith" (verse 17b)

This quotation from Habakkuk 2:4 is key for Paul as he seeks to establish that faith has always been the basis for salvation throughout history. The principle of faith he is teaching is not a new idea but extends from the Old Testament. This verse is also quoted by Paul in Galatians 3:11, and by the writer of Hebrews in 10:38. The two words, *live* and *faith* are key words throughout the early chapters of Romans, and their distribution is interesting. They summarise two sections of the letter:

- Chapters 3 and 4 are primarily about the importance of faith "faith" words appear 29 times; "life" words 3 times
- Chapters 5 to 8 are about the life that comes from this faith "life" words appear 25 times; "faith" words 3 times

This breakdown makes Paul's use of the Habakkuk quotation clear. Faith is the basis of life, which comes because God makes the person righteous (declares them right with Himself) on the basis of their faith alone.

One concern that is raised about Paul's use of this verse from Habakkuk is that the Hebrew word translated "*faith*" in Habakkuk 2:4 actually means 'faithfulness' rather than 'trust'. In other words it is about the person being loyal and trustworthy rather than them placing their dependence on God. The two ideas, however, are entirely interdependent in Scripture, and the word means both. It is a wrong notion of faith that can separate it from the idea of faithfulness. Faith places its dependence solely in the one it trusts in. Faith leads to faithfulness. In the context in Habakkuk, the person of faith (or faithfulness) is contrasted with the person who is "*puffed up*" (Habakkuk 2:4). In other words, faith is the opposite of pride. It is simple dependence upon God in humility.

Summary

In summary, Paul was so confident in the gospel because:

- a) **It is true** – he points to three core strands of evidence for this:
- It is rooted in history as recorded in the writings of the Old Testament (verse 2).
 - It is centred on the historical person Jesus, who rose from the dead, not a theory or religious philosophy (verses 3-4).
 - It launched a world-wide movement that was transforming people (verses 5-6, 8).
- b) **It works** – the gospel is a living, dynamic power that brings people into right relationship with God and transforms them to be like Christ. It is powerful to effect complete salvation, as the first half of Romans reveals:
- PAST – Romans 1-4 – being made right with God (justification)
 - PRESENT – Romans 5-8 – being made like Christ (sanctification)
 - FUTURE – Romans 8 – being made to share in His glorious future (glorification)

Questions

- Why might we be tempted to be ashamed of the gospel in our present day society?
- What distortions of the gospel do we see today?
- Reading over 1:1-17 again, what words strike you as being most important to understand for the gospel to make sense?