

**The Gospel as it Really Is
Romans Simply Explained
Romans 1:1-17
Who, What, Why?
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One evening last week I set up my telescope to look at the night sky. The first object I turned to was the planet Venus, but I quickly realised something was wrong: instead of one planet I was seeing were 3 or 4 planets all on top of each other! The telescope was “out of collimation” and nothing could be brought into clear focus. (To restore the telescope I’ll have to collimate it– which I must do one evening!)

I start with this story because it’s possible for any one inside or outside the church, to possess a blurry confused view of the central, fundamental message of the Bible— which is the Good News of the Gospel. Either we have never heard the Gospel, have personally drifted away from the Gospel, or competing voices around us have put the heart-warming, peace-giving, hope-filling Good News of Jesus out of focus.

Well, there is no book in the Bible which will collimate our Gospel telescopes better than the letter of Paul’s to the Romans: if we pay close attention to this letter we will understand and rejoice in the true Gospel!

William Tyndale, the Bible translator who was burnt at the stake in 1536 for his faith in Jesus, wrote: *“This letter is the principle and most excellent part of the NT, the most pure Gospel... I think every Christian should not only know it off by heart, but also read it continually as the daily bread of the soul.”*

So Sunday by Sunday, God-willing, we’re going to make our way slowly through Romans. Today, let me simply introduce this letter, by asking Who wrote it, Why he wrote it and then What will it teach us? Who Why What?

Who?

Who wrote Romans? *“Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus called to be an apostle and set apart for the Gospel of God.” (verse 1)*

On the one hand Paul was an ordinary sinner who had received God's grace; he writes elsewhere: *"Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst!"* (1 Timothy 1:15)

But on the other hand Paul was special because of the call of God on his life - "called to be an apostle." (It's always God's call on our lives that makes us special!)

Paul was an apostle. What's an apostle?

Jesus wrote no books, but entrusted truth to his apostles, which included Paul. These men, inspired by the Holy Spirit were responsible for the 27 books of the New Testament, which together, along with the Old Testament became the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20). Apostles were marked out by unique supernatural powers: *"The things that mark an apostle—signs wonders and miracles—were done among you with great perseverance."* Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 9:12. For example, if someone took a handkerchief and made it touch Paul and then placed it on a sick person that person was healed. (Acts 19:12) There are no Apostles today, because foundations are laid only once!

So an apostle wrote Romans, but Paul goes further: in verse 1, he says that he was "set apart for the Gospel;" in verse 5 he gets more specific, *"Through him (Jesus Christ) and for his name's sake we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith."* (Romans 1:5). And in chapter 11:13 he goes even further: *"I am the apostle to the Gentiles."* (see also Ephesians 3:1-12, Gal 2:7)

The man who wrote the book we're studying on Sunday mornings was commissioned by God to take the Gospel to the whole Gentile world—in other words the non-Jewish world, that's you and I, and everyone in the world who is not a Jew. (In today's stats, that's around 99.8% of the world's population!) What an awesome responsibility! The other apostles preached mainly to Jews, but Paul's special mission was to take and explain the Good News, birthed in Palestine and rooted in the Old Testament, out into the world which had no Bible! This is important folks! Gentiles need to pay special attention to Paul!

When I read Biblical Studies at a secular university which will remain nameless, some of the lectures did not like Paul. Because he taught things about the roles of men and

women and about sexual ethics that were unpopular with western culture! But that is exactly Paul's role! There are ethical standards that are assumed by the Jews who have the Old Testament. But these truths are unknown to peoples without Bibles—it was Paul's task to share the Gospel—and the outworking of that Gospel - to Gentiles who did not know God's will. Be wary of anyone who speaks ill of Paul!

Therefore, since Paul is apostle to the gentiles, he is writing, not only, *“to all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints,”* but to every believer in the world!

Every believer is *“loved by God”* - is that not a wonderful truth to know, God loves us with an everlasting love. How did someone put it:

*“Your worse days are never so bad that you are beyond the **reach** of God's grace just as your best days are never so good that you are beyond the **need** of Gods grace.”*

Every believer is *“called to be saints”* - saint means *“holy one”* - God has made us holy through his Son and day by day he is making us holy by the power of his Spirit.

Why?

(1) Paul writes to complete his calling as the apostle to the Gentiles

For a long time he wanted to preach in the capital city of the Roman Empire: *“I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles” (11-13)*

But the Gentile church in Rome was formed before he got there —probably by converts who gossiped the Gospel back to their home city—we read in Acts 2:10 that there were visitors from Rome on the day of Pentecost.

Nevertheless Paul still feels a sense of responsibility for the Gentile Christians in Rome—whether they were converted through him or not. So he writes to encourage them in sound doctrine.

(2) Paul writes to strengthen everyone in the church at Rome!

But Paul loves the whole church, Jewish or Gentile background, *“To **all** in Rome”* he

writes, and he writes to strengthen them all. *“I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift (that gift is surely the Gospel) to make you strong..”* (verse 11)

Do you want to be a strong Christian? The words of Romans will give you power.

And notice, this blessing isn't a one way street *“that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.”* (v.12)

Blessing is never a one-way street is it? When the Lord lays it on our hearts to bless others, we get blessed ourselves?

The good folks at Rome are going to bless Paul! Especially when he eventually gets to meet him! Paul has a specific blessing he is looking forward to receiving, and this is the third reason for his letter:

(3) To gain support for a new western mission

Paul is writing this letter from Corinth, with future strategic plans in mind! (Paul never stands still—and I think there is a Gospel Zeal example for us all). He's lined up three trips:

Trip 1. Paul's planning to travel to Jerusalem very soon to oversee the donation of a large gift of money collected from the wealthier Gentile Christians for their poorer brothers in Judea.

Trip 2. From Jerusalem, he's planning to travel to Rome to visit the friends he's writing to....

...before travelling west to Spain to continue preaching the Gospel in western regions, that's **Trip 3.**

Rome is going to be an important staging post in his bigger plans to preach the Gospel in Spain. This is what he says in chapter 15, *“But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to visit you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to see you while passing through and that you will assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while”* (Romans 15:23-24)

So the third reason Paul writes Romans is to prepare them for his stop-over visit where he wants to enjoy their company and fellowship—and hopes they will assist him in his next mission field—perhaps with helpers or with money.

The fourth reason Paul writes the letter we plan to study week by week is this:

(4) Paul writes for the church in all time

Paul may not have even been aware of this reason—the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write this letter for all Christians of all time. For me, for you! Another apostle, by the name of Peter, in chapter 3 of his second letter recognised that the writings of Paul are inspired Scripture, just like Genesis or Isaiah or Jonah.

Paul unfolds the Gospel for his friends in Rome, without realising that God's plans were that this letter would prove to be the most systematic, logical, full exposition, explanation of the Good News, the Gospel in the whole of the NT! How wise God is! And how glad we should be that in our hands 2000 years down the line we have such a glorious full exposition of the Gospel!

What shall we learn from Romans?

What shall we learn?

The simple answer is: the real Gospel, the true Gospel, the authentic Gospel, the pure Gospel. Down the years including today, there have been many perversions of the Gospel:

There's the social Gospel, which says that the greatest needs of mankind are material needs, food, clothing.

There's the health and wealth Gospel, which teaches that it's God's will for you to be healthy and wealthy in this present life.

There's the Green Gospel, which says that our primary mission should be saving the planet, rather than saving souls. I recently had an email suggesting that every church should appoint of an eco-deacon or deaconess to promote green issues.

There's the Gnostic Gospel, which teaches —and this error appears in all ages—that

there is some secret or special knowledge which will put you on a plane above ordinary Christians.

And then there's the "Gospel+" Gospel, which teaches that the Gospel is all well and good, but to be put proper right with God you need not only the Gospel but something else. In the first century that "plus" was often circumcision. Today it can be "join this particular church group" or, "hold this particular truth" if you want to be the real deal.

We're going to learn what the real authentic, Gospel is.

The Gospel is about being right with God. The most important problem you and I have is not our health or our wealth, the greatest need of the world is not global warming; our number 1 problem is that we are sinners, in thought, word and deed, who are out of sorts with a holy God. We'll learn this. The Gospel provides God's wonderful remedy for our biggest problem.

The Gospel is about Jesus, God's Son, "...who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord." (1:2-4)

The Gospel is about believing in Jesus—faith is all we need to get right with God! "For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'

This authentic Gospel, brings to everyone who believes

- The forgiveness of all our sins
- The knowledge of Peace with God
- The comfort of the holy spirit
- And the glorious hope of eternal life

Conclusion

May God renew our minds, revive our hearts and stir our wills as we hear the Gospel afresh, today and in the months to come.