

Romans – Part 1

What's the deal with Romans?

- *Romans 1:16-17, 1-7*

Know who you are in Christ.

- *Romans 8:1-2, 6:18*

Know your calling.

- *Romans 1:7*

Know your purpose.

- *Deuteronomy 10:12; Romans 1:6*

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Romans: Faith, Family, Fullness Part One¹

There's been a lot of talk about Mars over the last decade or so, hasn't there? Governments and private businesses and billionaires have made rockets and have sent cameras and probes. We want to find out as much as we can about that great planet, and all of that is getting us closer and closer to being able to send people to Mars. But even though it's our nearest neighbor, it's still over a hundred and thirty million miles away. For centuries, people have imagined that there might be life on the Red Planet, maybe even intelligent life. There is still so much for us to learn and to discover – if only we could get there safely and figure out what's really going on there (if anything at all).

According to one New Testament scholar, NT Wright, that's kind of the feeling that a lot of people get when it comes to understanding the Apostle Paul in the Bible, and especially his letter to the Romans. If you sit down to begin casually reading Romans, you might feel like you are visiting an alien planet! It starts to feel like it's inaccessible and takes a whole lot of exploration and a whole bunch of work.

But maybe Romans isn't a planet; maybe Romans is actually the rocket, designed to take us a very long way, containing everything we need for the journey – a journey that takes us into deep faith!

So as we begin our summer long series in one of the most theologically comprehensive letters in the Bible, let me give some background information about it. Let's see if we can figure out...

What's the deal with Romans?

If we're going to be able to really dive into this, we are going to need to know what the deal is with this book. Now, we call it a book of the Bible, and maybe it feels like it takes a long time to read, but it is actually a letter – what Bible nerds call an "epistle." The New Testament is basically these types of literary styles: the Gospels, which tell the story and teachings of Jesus, Acts, which is similar to the Gospels except it's about the Holy Spirit, the letters, or the epistles, which is everything between Acts and Revelation. Revelation is the

¹ Resources:

NT Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans Part 1: Chapters 1-8* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004)

William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans*, 3rd ed. fully rev. & updated., The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002)

William M. Greathouse and George Lyons, *Romans 1–8: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2008)

John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, Fourth American Edition. (New York: J. Soule and T. Mason, 1818)

Clarence L. Bence, *Romans: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1996)

John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016)

last “book” of the New Testament, and it is what’s called apocryphal, because there are a lot of wild images and metaphors that are being used to make some very serious points about the church, about Jesus, and about his return. So everything from Romans to Jude are letters, and Romans is a big one. It’s one of the longest and most significant things ever written by the man whose name used to be Saul, from Tarsus. He was a Jewish rabbi who belonged to a group of religious people called Pharisees. He was very highly trained, very intelligent, and was passionately devoted to the Law of Moses, and was quickly climbing the corporate ladder of the Pharisees.

Because he was so committed to his religion, that after hearing the stories about Jesus’ resurrection, he saw Jesus and his followers as blasphemous and a threat to Jews, and he determined to wipe them out. With the blessing of the top Pharisees, Saul’s mission was finding believers in Jesus and either arresting them or having them killed.

But then he had a radical encounter with the risen Jesus, who knocked him off his horse (literally), and the experience blinded him until the eyes of his heart were opened to the truth that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Then his sight was restored, and Jesus commissioned Paul as an Apostle to the world of non-Jewish people called “Gentiles.”

To the Jews, the world was divided into two groups: Jews, and Gentiles. That was it – if you weren’t Jewish, you were a hopelessly sinful, pagan, lost, filthy and unclean Gentile. But Jesus sent Saul – a Jew – to be an Apostle to the Gentiles.

So Saul began using his Roman name, “Paul” as he brought the Good News of God’s love to all the Gentiles in all the towns and cities that he could possibly go to in the known world of the Roman Empire, telling them about the resurrected Jesus and starting these new Christian communities called churches. Paul would also sometimes write letters to these new church communities to help them, encourage them, teach them, and correct them. Romans is one of these letters, to the church in Rome. Paul wrote this letter sometime around 57 or 58 AD – barely a quarter century after Jesus’ resurrection.

We know from the book of Acts (18:1-2) that the church in Rome had been around for a while and was made up of both Jewish Christians and non-Jewish, or Gentile, Christians. The interesting thing about this letter, of all of Paul’s letters, is that Paul had not started this church and he had not been to Rome yet. I’ll explain more about that in a minute.

So here’s the church in Rome made up of Jews and Gentiles. But at one point, the emperor Claudius forced all the Jews out of Rome. Then about five years later, all the Jews, including Jesus-following Jews, were allowed to return. So when they got back, they found a church that had become very non-Jewish in both custom and practice; the church didn’t stick to Jewish religious rites and rituals. This created a lot of tension, so that by Paul’s day the Roman church was divided. They disagreed about how to follow Jesus, about whether non-Jewish Christians should practice the Sabbath or things like circumcision, cleansing rituals, eating only kosher foods, and on and on.

So Paul wrote the letter to accomplish a few things:

One, he wanted the divided church to become unified. Paul understood more than anybody outside of Jesus that God wants his church to be a unified multi-cultural church. We saw this last week as we learned from Pentecost and the miracle of speaking in other tongues or

languages, and you know it is our church's vision to be multi-cultural, as well as multi-generational and multi-site. So unity is a huge reason for Paul to write this letter.

Now back at the church in Jerusalem (that was made up of mostly Jewish Christians), the believers had fallen on hard times. Christians were being ostracized and persecuted, and so they couldn't even buy or sell food in the marketplace or do business with non-Jews. So Paul had started encouraging all the Gentile churches to participate in a generous offering that would go to the Church in Jerusalem. Paul saw the opportunity for generosity from the Roman Church to the Jerusalem Church as a way to not only meet their severe need, but also to unify the church between the Gentile and Jewish believers. So Paul writes the letter to get the church in Rome united around the truth of unity in the Gospel message, and encourage this offering as a tangible way to put that into practice.

Remember I mentioned though that Paul had not been to the church in Rome yet? We know that from history, and because this letter is different from all the other ones he wrote. The other ones always addressed lots of people that he knew personally, and along with important teaching, they also spoke to specific situations and circumstances that were unique to that particular church, whether in Corinth, Ephesus, Galatia, Philippi, or Thessalonica, or to individuals like Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. But there's none of those customary greetings or teachings in the letter to the church in Rome.

But, Paul longed to go there, and he talked and wrote about that a lot. The reason he wanted to go there is because Spain – the region beyond Rome – had become a part of the Roman empire, and so this was a region that had not yet had any exposure to the Gospel. It was an entire region of Gentiles that needed to hear about the Good News about Jesus. So Paul saw Rome as a sort of launching pad for a new work in Spain.

Think again about the efforts to reach Mars. It has brought about a renewed desire to return to the moon. Since Mars is over 130 million miles away, the moon is our closest “rest stop” on the journey. If we could set up a base on the moon, it would make it easier and quicker to reach Mars, by about a quarter million miles.

Well that's the strategy that Paul had in mind – the church in Rome could be a base from which he could bring the Gospel to Spain. But every rocket needs a solid, well architected launching pad; you can't just set up a rocket ship out in a field somewhere and expect it to successfully lift off. Paul's letter to the Romans was a way to build that theological launching pad. He wanted to make sure the church was focused on the priorities and the mission, and they needed to have a clear understanding of the Gospel message – who Jesus is and what God can do in us because of Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit. In fact, we can find Paul's “thesis statement” in chapter one, verses 16-17:

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. 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.” (Romans 1:16-17, niv)

Be sure to make note of those two verses and go back and look at them again later, because they are the summary of the entire letter – that through the Gospel, God's power can save us when we accept it in faith, and through that faith we are a new, united, chosen family of God, whether we are Jew or Gentile, and that as that united faith family we are able to be

filled with the Spirit himself, making us righteous – through and through holy examples of Jesus who live out the Gospel in the world. That’s why we are calling this series “Faith, Family, and Fulness” – Romans is telling us that by faith in Jesus we are God’s family, filled with the fulness of the Spirit.

Got that?

We’re going to do a deep dive into this jam-packed letter. It’s been called Paul’s magnum opus, Paul’s gospel presentation, a masterclass in the gospel, and the theological fundamentals or launching pad of teaching on the Christian faith. Be sure to bring your journal or something to take notes in over this summer together. At times we will be going slow, taking passages almost word by word, and at other times there is so much profound teaching that we will have to give you the “big ideas” of passages or else we would still be going through Romans three years from now!

So now, we’re going to start today by looking at Paul’s greeting to the Romans in the first seven verses. Since this is the primary passage we are going to look at today, would you honor God’s Word and show your commitment to understanding it by standing with me as I read it? Thank you!

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God— the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his 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. Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name’s sake. And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.
(Romans 1:1-7, niv)

Thank you! Please be seated. Please keep this passage open in front of you in your Bibles or your Bible apps, because we’ll refer to it from here on in.

So I want us to first understand what Paul is getting at, and then we will get to the application of it for our lives, okay?

Pray for enlightenment and for the Spirit to empower us to embody the Word in our lives.

Okay, so again, this is basically Paul’s greeting to the church in Rome, but still, it’s full of some powerful content.

The main “content” of this greeting is sort of a commentary or explanation of “the gospel of God,” as he calls it in verse one. So in these few brief opening verses, what does Paul tell us about the gospel?

Paul right away makes the point in verse two that the gospel was *promised* beforehand, all over in the Old Testament. He says that God promised this Good News through his prophets and through the Scriptures. For Paul, the Scriptures were the Old Testament – there was no New Testament collection of Scriptures yet. And it might help you to know

that of the 39 books of the Old Testament, 21 – over half – were considered the prophets. The point that Paul is making is that the entire Old Testament promises the Good News of God's love through Jesus Christ. The gospel is all about Jesus Christ! The entire Old Testament points to him!

So, in very concise words, Paul tells us that. Then what does the gospel tell us about Jesus? In verse three Paul tells us that Jesus is the heir to King David. God had promised David that from his family line would come an eternal Kingdom (2 Samuel 7:12-16). That promise became the source of expectation for the Jews about the coming Messiah (Isaiah 11:1, 10; Jeremiah 23:5-6). This was a key proof of the Messiah, and Jesus meets it. Paul also tells us in verse four that Jesus is God in flesh, or as theologians call it, "incarnate" – which is God as a human being. Jesus IS the Son of God, raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit himself.

Right out of the gates, Paul is firmly establishing that the long promised Good News has arrived in the person of Jesus the Christ – God himself – the Son of God.

Then Paul tells us that it is this Jesus who has the authority to call and commission people to be his spokespersons or his representatives, in verse five.

Paul says in verse six that Jesus is also the One who can authorize anyone and everyone to be God's chosen people, if they'll accept it in faith. Everyone – Jewish or not, can be in God's family. In fact, in verse seven, Paul points out that through Jesus, God calls us and literally *makes us* his holy people. That means Jesus is the one who called the apostles to the gospel ministry (verse 5), and therefore to us as well, since we are "his holy people" (verses 5 and 7).

How's that for greetings? I mean, we write letters, and we start out by saying, "Dear Joe, How are you?" Paul starts out this letter laying out the answer to the centuries old promises of God, that Jesus is Son of God, that we can be saved and part of God's family, and that Jesus has called Paul – and us – to be Christ's representatives!

So what can you and I learn from this passage? Besides clearly laying out the Gospel, what is it challenging us with as Christians today?

Well, consider this: Paul knew who he was and what his purpose was. Paul introduces himself as "a slave of Jesus Christ." What does that mean? *He's telling us that his entire life and purpose in this world is to be submitted to Jesus Christ, and to spend his life doing what Jesus tells him to do. (Repeat)* Paul is an example for us.

By the way, the phrase, "slave of Jesus Christ" is a sort of code for the Jews. The Jews would have recognized the phrase "a servant of Yahweh" or "a servant of the most high God" from the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 34:5, e.g.) But Paul replaced "Yahweh" with "Christ Jesus," so Paul is saying that Jesus is God, and that Paul is a servant to God. Paul knew who he was and what his purpose was; *do you?* Paul's telling us *that his entire life and purpose in this world is to be submitted to Jesus Christ, and to spend his life doing what Jesus tells him to do.* Are you? Right away in this amazing letter, we are confronted with the reality that you need to...

Know who you are in Christ.

As a Christian, your life, your identity, your purpose, is all found in Jesus and because of Jesus. Paul will write later in this letter:

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. (Romans 8:1-2, niv)

You are now free – not free to sin; you are now free NOT to sin! (*repeat*) You are now free to serve Jesus; to be a servant of Jesus. Again, later in this letter, Paul will tell us:

You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.
(Romans 6:18, niv)

So one thing you need to settle is who you are. Paul knew who he was; he was a slave to Christ. Are you? Because if you are, then you will also...

Know your calling.

Like Paul, you are called to be someone who delivers this message of the Gospel. You are now a living representative of the truth of how God can save and transform someone with his love. Because you are His servant, you will do what he tells you, and what he tells you is that you are now holy. That means you live in a completely different way; you no longer choose to sin but instead live a life of holy love for God and for others. Remember, Paul wrote this letter:

To all ... who are loved by God and called to be his holy people. (Romans 1:7, niv emphasis added).

You are called to be God's holy people. And by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, you actually can be God's holy people. That's your calling.

And because that is your calling, you now...

Know your purpose.

Your purpose is to live out this new life in Christ, showing and sharing the Good News, bringing the Gospel to others both verbally and visually. This has always been God's purpose for us, for you. Listen to this from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy:

And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? He requires only that you fear the Lord your God, and live in a way that pleases him, and love him and serve him with all your heart and soul. (Deuteronomy 10:12, nlt)

Like Paul, be a servant of Christ Jesus, whose purpose is to share the Gospel with others through your life of love and through your words; you will introduce people to Jesus Christ, you will equip people with a faith that works, and you will live as people with purpose. That's again why Paul wrote to us in verse six:

And you are included among those Gentiles who have been called to belong to Jesus Christ. (Romans 1:6, nlt)

Know who you are in CHRIST, your calling in CHRIST, and your purpose in CHRIST. Paul did. Do you? That's what Romans is about. That's the thesis statement in verses 16 and 17 – let me read those to you again (listen) –

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. 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.” (Romans 1:16-17, niv)

Prayer (Know who you are in CHRIST, your calling in CHRIST and your purpose in CHRIST.)

Benediction:

Do not be ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus; live in such a way that your life demonstrates it. Visually and verbally, let people know that they too can believe it, and the plans and intentions of God for us – the very righteousness of God – can be demonstrated by the way we live. Be a servant of Christ Jesus.