

God's Good News

Romans 1:1-17

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What is God up to? How can we get in on it? If the Lord God, the creator and ruler of the world, of the universe, has a purpose and is acting on it, we want to be part of it. We want to find our place in what God is doing.

We're setting out to explore the apostle Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome in the middle of the first century. He writes about many things, but the focus all through the letter is God.

There are several storylines in Romans. We see Paul's own story. He describes himself as a slave of Jesus the Messiah. He's called to be an apostle and set apart for God's gospel, God's good news. We can find more details about Paul's story in his other letters and the book of Acts. Here he's content to be identified by the good news of God. A little later he talks about his ministry to the Gentiles, the non-Jewish peoples of the world. That was his primary mission field, though he never quit loving and longing for his fellow Jews to know Jesus.

Along with Paul's story is the story of the community he was part of. In the last chapter of Romans, Paul mentions many people by name. Some are in Rome; some are with him as he writes. In fact, we read this sentence, "I Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord" (16:22). What's most likely is that Paul dictated the letter and Tertius wrote what he said.

Paul also commends to the Romans a woman he calls "our sister" Phoebe. She was a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. That was a port near Corinth where Paul was when he sent this letter. He asks the Roman Christians to receive Phoebe in the Lord and to help her. He says she's been a benefactor to many people including Paul. A lot of scholars think that Phoebe worked with Paul as he composed this letter and that he instructed and even coached her on how to read it to the Jesus followers in Rome—what to emphasize and how to answer questions about what he said. Phoebe then took the letter to Rome and read it to the various house churches in the city.

That leads to another storyline. It's the story of the church in Rome. We probably do better to think of a number of Christian gatherings in the city. Groups of one or two dozen people met in various homes. Estimates are that the population of Rome was around a million at this time. There were probably a few dozen or at most two hundred Christians in the city then.

Some of the Christians in Rome came from a Jewish background. Most were Gentiles. All the Jews, including some of the Jewish Christians, had been kicked out of Rome by the emperor Claudius some years before Paul wrote this letter. After Claudius died and Nero became emperor, they were allowed to return. Trying to hold together communities with people of different backgrounds was challenging and created a lot of tension. Paul deals with this issue throughout the letter. When he addresses groups he calls the "weak" and the "strong" he's encouraging them to work toward unity.

Another storyline in Romans is the story of Israel. Adam, Abraham, Jacob and Esau, David—all these figures in Israel's history appear here. Paul quotes and refers to the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, a lot in Romans.

These storylines—of Paul and his mission and his community, of the Roman churches, of Israel—all of them are part of a bigger story, they're all within a greater story. It's God's story. This is what Paul calls the gospel of God or, we could say, God's good news. It's also called the gospel of God's Son, Jesus. It's the story of what God has been up to all along, of what God did in Jesus the Messiah, of what God is doing in the Holy Spirit. It's the story of God's righteousness, justice, faithfulness. It's the story of salvation.

In this opening passage, Paul uses the phrase "the gospel" four times and refers to it another time. "Gospel" is a word that means "good news." It's an announcement, a proclamation. When we hear this good news, we not only learn about something that has happened, we enter into it, we experience it.

Paul says the gospel of God is what God promised through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures. It's the good news regarding God's Son. Here's the gospel, the good news of Jesus. According to the flesh, as a

human being, Jesus was a descendant of Israel's great king David. Through the Spirit of holiness, that is the Holy Spirit, Jesus was appointed or shown to be the Son of God in power. This happened by his resurrection from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus is the center of God's good news.

This one who is God and human, who died and was raised to life again is Jesus Christ our Lord. He is Jesus the Savior (that's what the name Jesus means). He is Messiah, God's chosen and anointed one. He is Lord. The Messiah of Israel is Lord of the world. In Jesus, God shows his faithfulness. He fulfills his promises. He defeats death. The good news of God is the announcement of what God has done in Jesus the Messiah and Lord.

A Christian author tells about giving a lecture to students at a Christian college. He began by telling them he was going to present the gospel, but leave out one very important element. Then he talked about all kinds of sin in our culture and described how sin separates us from God. He went on to talk about "the beauty of morality." He told stories, giving examples of how living right is better. He told about how great heaven is. He spoke of repentance and how their lives could be God-honoring and God-centered. Then he says,

I rested my case and asked the class if they could tell me what I left out of this gospel presentation. Not a single hand raised. ...I presented a gospel to Christian Bible college students and left out ... Jesus. Nobody noticed.

(www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2021/march/whats-missing-from-your-gospel.html)

We can't leave out Jesus. We're talking about the gospel of God. Paul refers to God often in Romans. But God makes himself known in Jesus. God acts to fulfill promises in Jesus. God gives grace and peace in Jesus. God reveals his righteousness and faithfulness in Jesus. It's in the death and resurrection of Jesus that God defeats sin and death and offers new life to all of creation, including us.

At a church in Bangladesh, the Good Friday service was packed. Little children sat on the floor in the aisles and across the front of the church. Rows of people stood in the back. They were watching the “Jesus Film”—a film produced in the 70s that tells the story of Jesus. It’s been shown to millions of people in numerous locations over the years. As this crowd in Bangladesh watched the crucifixion scene, weeping and gasps of unbelief were heard in the shocked hush as Jesus was crucified. The people felt the agony of Jesus’ pain and the disappointment of the disciples.

In that emotional moment, a young boy in the crowded church cried out, “Do not be afraid. He gets up again! I saw it before.”

That small boy’s encouraging cry gave new hope to the people watching the film. “He is risen!” is the cry that gives hope to anyone. (www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/1997/september/3376.html)

That good news of the creator God, the faithful God of Israel and what he did in Jesus the Messiah, that good news compelled Paul and others to travel all over the Roman empire making this announcement. As Paul writes to the Christians in Rome he plans to take an offering back to Jerusalem. Then he hopes to visit Rome and from there launch a mission to the west, going as far as Spain. On the way he wants to encourage and be encouraged by the Roman Christians.

Paul tried to proclaim God’s good news in places where it hadn’t been heard. It had already taken root in Rome, but Paul expected he could still have a harvest there. He was eager to preach the gospel in Rome.

For, he says, I am not ashamed, *for* the gospel is God’s power, *for* in it God’s righteousness is unveiled, *as it is written* (see N. T. Wright, *Romans. The New Interpreter’s Bible*. Vol. 10).

Shame and honor were a big deal in Roman culture. Paul is probably also thinking about several OT psalms that express the desire for God’s people not to be put to shame and God’s promise that those who trust in him won’t be put to shame. He may also have Jesus’ words in mind when he said, “If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38).

The gospel, God's good news, is about true honor, ultimate honor. It's not something to be ashamed of because it's the power of God. Not only God's acts of power in the past, not only what God did in Jesus' death and resurrection, but announcing what God did in Jesus is power. As you hear the gospel, the good news that God is faithful, that God's Son Jesus died for you, that God raised him from the dead, as you hear that you encounter the power of God. The Word of God and the Spirit of God work together to convince us and draw us and transform us.

This power of God in the gospel brings salvation to everyone who believes. Salvation is rescue and deliverance. It's forgiveness and transformation. It's new life with God through Jesus in the Holy Spirit. This new life shows up in all kinds of places in all kinds of ways.

Last summer, the intersection where George Floyd was killed by a Minneapolis police officer became the center of a move of God. Among the gatherings there, musicians gave concerts and various evangelists and pastors preached the gospel. People gave their lives to Christ. There were baptisms on the spot. At what one preacher called "the intersection of pain in America," there were moments of reconciliation and forgiveness. The gospel, the good news of God, was taking root and spreading (www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2020/july/revival-at-corner-where-george-floyd-was-killed.html). At a site of violence, conflict, chaos, and confusion God is at work bringing new life.

That's something like what God does at the cross of Jesus. Where we rejected God in the person of his Son. Where evil did its worst, Jesus shows God at his best. Where sin seemed to rule, God pours out forgiveness. Where we were at our most unfaithful, God showed himself to be most faithful. And then in the resurrection of Jesus, God defeated all the enemies of God's kingdom and all our worst enemies, including sin and death. We can live now in the hope that the defeat of those enemies will finally be revealed.

There's another storyline in Romans. And it's ours. We can be part of God's story.

The gospel that is the power of God brings salvation to everyone who believes, everyone who has faith. This is because the gospel, God's good

news, reveals or unveils God's righteousness. God's righteousness here is God's faithfulness to his covenant with Israel. It's God's faithfulness revealed in Jesus. The righteousness of God is being revealed from God's faithfulness through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah to produce faithfulness in us who hear the gospel (A. Katherine Grieb, *The Story of Romans* xxi).

God is faithful and reveals his righteousness. God shows his justice. God is out to put right all that's wrong in us, in the world, in all creation. God does this through Jesus who is faithful. We receive and experience this as we put our faith in Jesus and live by faith. We live because of Jesus' faithfulness that inspires and enables our faithfulness. Faith is obedience to God's command and it produces a life of obedience. The command of the gospel calls us to give our allegiance to Jesus with our body and mind, our heart and soul. And the basis for this call is the resurrection of Jesus (Wright).

The good news of God, the gospel is not just about making us feel a little better about ourselves. Though it does make us feel better about God and each other and ourselves. It's not just about getting our sins forgiven, though that's part of it. It's not just about cleaning up our behavior, though it does change how we live. The good news of God, the gospel is about the creator God, the faithful God of Israel coming to us in Jesus and showing his covenant love and faithfulness. It's about redeeming the whole creation. That's what God is up to. And we get to be in on it through faith, by a life of faithfulness empowered by God's Spirit.

Kurt Vonnegut was a famous novelist. I haven't read any of his stuff, but our son Eric has. He started reading him in high school, though he says he didn't understand a lot of it then. I recently read about Vonnegut's novel *Timequake*. It centers on a series of stories about people who've lost control of their lives. Instead of determining their own destinies, the characters in the book enter a "timequake" where they're forced to repeat the same bad choices over and over again with no possibility for improvement or redemption. It sounds kind of like the movie *Groundhog Day* without the learning and improvement. In Vonnegut's novel, when the timequake finally ends and people can again live their own lives, most people are still gripped by Post-Timequake Apathy. This keeps them frozen

by despair. One of the main characters named Kilgore Trout is the only one who isn't gripped by this apathy. Toward the end of the story, he tries to revive others by repeating this motto: "You were sick, but now you're well, and there's work to do"

(www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2021/february.1022712.html).

The gospel, God's good news tells us "the world was good, the world is fallen, the world will be redeemed" (Andrew Peterson). It tells us that we were sick with sin, but through the death and resurrection of Jesus we can be made well and live a new life. It tells us the story of God who is out to make all things new, including us. It tells us of God who in Jesus made our story his so that he could make his story ours (Arden Autry, *His Story Mine*).

How do we experience this? How do we enter God's story? We hear the good news. You've heard it today. We recognize God's faithfulness and we put our faith in God through Jesus. You believe the good news, you believe God, you believe Jesus. And you surrender to him. You give the Lord God your allegiance. Later in Romans, it says it this way: "If you declare with your mouth 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ...for 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'" (10:9, 13).

Pray. Tell God you believe. Tell him that you want to have faith in him, that you want to be faithful to him. Ask him to save you and to make your life story part of God's great story.