

The Gospel For All Seasons

Romans 1:1; Acts 9:1-9

Call: Ps 145:8-13 (NIV)

Scripture: Mark 1:14-15 (ESV)

I. Introduction

A. Introduction

Good Morning. I love that text that Allan just read. That text, mirrored also in Matthew, is the only place where Jesus, Himself, defines the Gospel. *“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel”* (Mk 1:14-15). With Jesus, a new world order began breaking into this world, a whole new order of existence began breaking into this world. And, then, His encouragement, turn around and put the weight of your entire life on this Gospel, on this good news.

Today, we begin a new study in the book of Romans, which will integrate, contextualize and provide implications of *that* Gospel that Jesus lived and proclaimed. And, in Romans, we will be encouraged to put the weight of our entire life on that Gospel. Romans is indeed “The Gospel For All Seasons.” No matter where you are in life, the book is for you.

B. Plan

This morning, I simply want to provide a foundation for this new study. And to do that I want to ask 5 contextual questions of the book:

1. What was life like in 1st century Rome?
2. Who wrote Romans?
3. When was it written?
4. Why was Romans written?
5. And, lastly, what can we expect from our study in Romans?

So, those five questions will structure our time this morning.

II. What Was Life Like in 1st Century Rome?

So, first of all, what was life like in 1st century Rome, the city which is typically called “The Eternal City”? To answer this question, I want you to imagine you are living there. You are a middle-aged person, that is to say you are in your late 20s, since only about 7% of people at that time reached the age of 60. (Oh to be in my 20s again!) Life at that time was very, very difficult.

Your story is like most, that you used to be a slave, living in terrible conditions, enslaved to a brutal master. But you’ve now worked hard to get out of slavery, to where you now have a bit of status. Social status is everything in Roman life, so you plan to do everything possible to not lose it. Everything possible includes sabotaging or undermining others who might get ahead of you.

You live in a two story apartment building, a high rise at that time. You feel like you're finally living the good life because you are finally free and living in the greatest city in history. Rome is the center of the greatest empire the world has ever seen. Here is where the rich and famous live, all the entrepreneurs, all the politicians, the best artisans, and of course the great gladiators, not to mention Caesar, the savior of the world, and the reason for Rome being the greatest city on earth.

And, yet, for some reason, lately, you've been noticing more of the dark side to life in Rome. Although the great gladiators are awesome, you've become aware of the excessive violence all over the city, not just within the gladiator fights. But then you realize, of course this is the case, because you and your friends are careful to never walk the streets at night. It's much too dangerous. Lately, you've also noticed the amount of homeless people everywhere. You guess they've always been there, but you've only just begun noticing.

You've also recently become aware that Romans did whatever they wanted with their bodies. Actually, for the most part, there were simply no boundaries to any area of life. Everyone just did what was right in their own eyes.

You're not sure why you're only now becoming aware of these things – maybe because you've recently begun attending a new social group down the street where they talk about social topics and how to live life in community. They call this new group a church. As with most people, you're highly involved in several other social groups, but all of them are made up of people who look just like you – which makes sense because you can't stand anyone that looks different than you. Yes – you hate everyone different from you. I mean that's just the way life works in Rome, everyone sticks with their tribe.

But, this church group is quite different. It's made up of all kinds of different people who – sort of get along most of the time. They're calling themselves *The Way*. As with almost everyone, in your hopelessness and despair, you've tried all the different religions of Rome: the Greco-Roman gods, the philosophy schools, the mystery religions, and of course, emperor worship, which is becoming more and more of a thing. But, none of those religions have touched your hopelessness and despair, so you're trying this new thing, which meets in a cramped apartment in another high rise down the street.

In fact, you're heading there now because a letter from a famous man named Paul to this church is being read. Apparently he's a big shot among *The Way* people. The word on the street is that this letter will be full of good news. You thought the emperor was the only bearer of good news, so this sounds interesting to you. And, wow, could you ever use some good news right about now.

And, that's what life might have felt like as a middle-aged person living in 1st century Rome. It was a dangerous and dirty place. It was diverse and pluralistic, but extremely tribalistic. It was known for its depravity and self-indulgence. And it was full of homelessness, hopelessness and despair. Life was very difficult.

It doesn't sound too different from our context. And, the only thing that has the power to break through all of that darkness is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, what Romans is all about.

III. Romans Background

A. Introduction

Romans is indeed an impressive piece of literature, sometimes called the “Everest of the New Testament” (Packer). It's the longest letter in the New Testament with the most detailed, and sometimes complex, presentation of the Gospel. This letter is a theological heavyweight no doubt, to which I come with great humility. But, it also deals with practical topics, topics which can be found scattered throughout the current headlines of any newsfeed. So, the book is not only concerned with theology, but also with how to live that theology.

B. Structure

The general structure of Romans conforms to the structure of many other letters in the New Testament. The first half of the letter is mostly the good news of the Gospel. And, the second half, actually beginning in chapter 12, contains implications of that good news in our lives, the good advice of the Gospel. Good advice always flows out of the good news. Actually you can't have good advice without the good news.

IV. Who and When? (1:1)

A. Introduction

So, who wrote Romans? Well, Romans 1:1 says: *“Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—”* (Rom 1:1, NIV).

B. Who is Paul?

As with early letter writing standards, the author introduces himself immediately. The Apostle Paul wrote Romans, and there is virtually no controversy about it, which is quite rare on these things. And, he probably wrote Romans from Corinth on his third missionary journey sometime around AD 57-58. This is toward the end of the critical decade of the Apostle Paul's primary missionary activity. It's a decade which changed the world.

So, who is Paul? I want to spend quite a bit of time here because understanding Paul and his story will greatly affect how we read Romans or any of his letters. Everything Paul writes arises from his story.

So what is his story? If you grew up in the church, you'll know it well. If you didn't, then you'll want to listen closely to the next ten minutes.

C. Paul's Story Introduction

After Jesus, Paul *is* the most influential figure in Christianity. He's the author of thirteen New Testament letters, which is almost half of the New Testament. As I said earlier, in these letters, he contextualizes, integrates and provides implications of the Gospel. But, all of that happens

after he meets Jesus. Before meeting Jesus, Paul's life could be described as the preparation of the perfect instrument for God's purposes.

In other words, God knew what he was doing in preparing Paul for ministry. God gave him gifts, talents and experiences to prepare him for his purposes. In this way, you and I are not much different from Paul. God has given each of us gifts, talents and experiences to use for His purposes. And, I would encourage all of us to think through what they might be, and how you may be using them.

D. Paul's Early Life

So Paul was born around AD 5, and grew up as Saul, a Hellenistic Jew in Tarsus (Acts 22:3; Phil 3:5), the fourth largest city of the Roman empire. He's a Roman citizen, is very familiar with Greek customs and the Greek philosophy schools, and is very sensitive to the issues involved in living as God's people in a pagan world (ie. eating idol food; living peaceable lives, etc). But, he is also a "*Hebrew of the Hebrews... a Pharisee*" of the Pharisees (Phil 3:5). In other words, he's an A++ student. He's taken all the AP classes. I think he's probably one of the top 7-8 thinkers in the history of the world. He's simply a brilliant man. He *is* thoroughly Jewish in his thinking, having studied under a man named Gamaliel in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3). This probably makes him more liberal compared to his Jewish contemporaries. He could also vote in the Sanhedrin (Acts 26:10), meaning he had very high status. He was passionate and zealous for God. As you can see, God was preparing Saul to be the perfect instrument for his purposes.

E. The Damascus Road

Then, the Damascus Road happened. He gets converted, called and commissioned on the Road to Damascus, and it changes the history of the world. This event is so important it is recounted three times in Acts alone (chs 9, 22 and 26), while being alluded to repeatedly in his letters.

I want to read the event from Acts 9. And, I want you to simply listen to the story:

1 ... *Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. 3 As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"*

5 "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. 6 "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

7 *The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. 8 Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. 9 For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything. (NIV)*

After those three days, God uses a man named Ananias to place his hands on Saul and restore his sight. The text says that *“Immediately [after Ananias had placed his hands on Saul], something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength”* (Acts 9:18-19).

That’s the Damascus road experience. Once again, if you’re not familiar with this story, Saul is the same as Paul, Paul being his Greek name.

F. Implications of The Damascus Road

There are a few things about this story which will help us in our study of Romans because, as I said, everything we will read from Paul is shaped by this Damascus road experience. So, listen to these Gospel nuggets from the Damascus road. Here is good news not only for Paul, but for us today:

1. **The Lord:** First of all, notice that Paul calls Jesus, *“Lord.”* He says, *“Who are you Lord?”* In Paul’s Bible, what we call the Old Testament, the only person claiming Lordship is Yahweh, the living God. Paul sees this light from heaven and hears a person talking out of the light, and calls Him *“Lord.”* The person then identifies Himself as Jesus. *“Jesus is Lord,”* Paul’s title for Jesus throughout Romans.
2. **Resurrection:** Secondly, it’s important to note that this experience for Paul was not a vision. It was a resurrection appearance. Why is this so important? Because for Paul, once again steeped in the Old Testament, it means a resurrection has happened! He is risen! (He is risen indeed!) Back in Ezekiel 37, Ezekiel saw a valley of dry bones, in which he prophesied over, and the bones were resurrected and came to life. For Paul, this vision of the resurrection would be fulfilled at the end of time. But, with this experience, it means Jesus is alive now! He’s been resurrected in the middle of time! The resurrection has happened, not at the end of time, but in the middle of time! And Paul will jump right to the resurrection in verse 4 of chapter 1.
3. **Vindication:** Now, if this is true, if Jesus has been resurrected, then that means vindication for him. God has vindicated Jesus. That means Jesus really is who he claimed to be. If he’s resurrected, he really is *“the Son of God,” “the bread of life,” “the light of the world,” “the way, the truth and the life,”* and on and on and on. He really is who he said he was. Jesus is and spoke truth, another great theme in Romans.
4. **The Center:** Fourthly, if Jesus is who he claimed to be, then Paul needs to rethink the Old Testament. Paul’s entire understanding of the Old Testament must change. The Old Testament, particularly the law, had been the center of life for him! His whole life revolved around the law. No more is that case! Jesus would now have to be the center of life. And Paul must now go back and re-read and re-understand the Old Testament in light of Jesus, the vindicated one, the resurrected and living One. And, we will see this throughout Romans as Paul leans on the Old Testament to argue for the Gospel.
5. **The Cross:** Fifthly, Paul’s view of the cross must change. If God had vindicated Jesus, who had died on a cursed tree, who really then is cursed? The cross can’t be cursed, nor can it be weakness and foolishness. If Jesus is vindicated, the cross must be God’s wisdom and God’s power. See Romans 6 and Romans 8 (and 1 Corinthians 1:18-25).

6. **Grace:** And, lastly, the great culmination – grace must be a major theme of the life of faith. If God had called him, a horrible, murderous enemy, he could call anyone. Paul knows that he deserves nothing, because, as he says elsewhere, he’s the foremost of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). Yet, Grace. Grace will permeate and infuse everything Paul writes, because he has lived it.

Grace describes a gift which is absolutely free, unearned and undeserved. As I have said many times and will continue to say, grace means you can start over again. And in no person’s life is that more relevant than in Paul’s. God gave him a new start and made him the apostle of grace. Grace is the catalyst for everything he writes. Grace says it’s not about us and our doing, it’s all about God and God’s doing. Our hope rests not on ourselves, but on God.

That’s why throughout Scripture there are two words which are two of the most important words in all of Scripture – “but God.” We all have a “but God” moment in our lives, when grace broke through to us. What was your “but God” moment? For Paul, it was the Damascus road. And, in Romans, Paul will pastor us through God’s Gospel of grace.

So, that’s Paul’s story, which will help us understand Romans. But, immediately it helps us understand the first verse in Romans, where Paul describes himself in three specific ways.

G. Romans 1:1 Identifiers

1. He’s “*a servant of Christ Jesus.*” The word for servant here is *doulos*. A *doulos* is technically a slave who belongs to a master. This person does what the master wants, when the master wants it done and how the master wants it done. This is the same word Paul uses of Jesus in the great hymn of Philippians 2. Out of grace, Paul no longer belongs to himself, but belongs entirely to Jesus, his master. Paul had turned around and put the weight of his entire life on Jesus. In the same way, when Jesus meets us in grace, we become “*douloses*” too, servants of Him.
2. Paul is also an “*apostle.*” Apostle simply means “sent one.” Paul follows great men of the Old Testament who heard and answered the call of God, people like Abraham (Gen 12:1-3) and Moses (Ex 3:10) and Jeremiah (Jer 1:4-5) and Isaiah (Isa 6:8-9). Out of grace, Paul heard the call of Jesus on the Damascus road, and he answered it.
3. And, Paul is “*set apart for the Gospel of God.*” For every person, God has a plan. God has a plan for you, and God has a plan for me. None of us leads a purposeless life. Out of grace, Paul was set apart to bring the Gospel of God to all people. In some sense, that’s the mission for all Christians. We are all set apart not for ourselves, but for the Gospel.

So, now we have a good foundation for Paul, the writer of this great letter and when he wrote it. So, why did he write it?

V. Why?

A. Introduction

Well, here we find lots of disagreements among scholars, which means I think that there is no “one” reason for Romans. Obviously, from verse one to the end, Paul is focused on the Gospel, and implications of the Gospel, so he obviously wants us to know the Gospel. Also, Romans is sometimes called “The Letter of Life” because life is such a major theme of the letter. Other themes seem to be how to find freedom, how to find peace and how to live in unity. Some people think Paul writes it to raise future mission support or to provide an apostolic foundation for the Roman church since it doesn’t have one.

B. Title

And, then, because of all of those different reasons, people have given different titles to Romans such as:

- Total Help For Total Need (Barth)
- Not Ashamed of the Gospel (Rutledge)
- The Gospel of Peace (Spilsbury)
- The Truth For All of Life (Stott)
- Knowing God’s Plan for the World (Barnett)

As I said up front, I’m calling our study, “The Gospel For All Seasons.” No matter what season of life you’re in, this book is for you. And, no matter what situation you’re in within your season of life, this book is for you. And, no matter what you’re feeling within your season of life, this book is for you. For me, I just sent my oldest away to college, so that has brought up many different feelings, while also depleting the savings account. This book is for me. Romans is the Gospel for all seasons of life.

VI. What Can We Expect?

So, lastly, what can we expect from our journey through Romans? Well, I’m glad you asked. If history has anything to say, I think we can expect great things. You may know that the book of Romans has had an enormous impact throughout the history of the church.

- **Augustine:** It was Romans which essentially converted the brilliant thinker Augustine in the 4th century. It was after reading Romans that he said, “Instantly a clear light flooded my heart, [and] all the darkness of doubt vanished away.” He then gave his life to Jesus, and became known as “The Doctor of Grace.”
- **Martin Luther:** Of course Romans was a primary text for the Reformers in the 16th century. For professor Luther, it was as he was preparing lectures on Romans that he discovered God’s grace. He wrote later, “I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of scripture took on a new meaning to me.” Later he would write that Romans was “the chief part of the New Testament and the purest Gospel of all,” no doubt because of its impact on his own life.
- **John Wesley:** And, then, there was the revivalist John Wesley in the 18th century. At Oxford, he founded a club for pious young men called the Holy Club. This club was as upright and religious as any club could be, being ultra-disciplined in devotions while

serving the poor daily. Yet, as Wesley wrote later, he doesn't even think he was a Christian at that point. He then came to America to serve as a pastor to British colonists in Georgia. After two years he went back to England a very disillusioned man. He wrote in his diary, "I went to America to convert others, but, oh, who will convert me?" And, then, in 1738, he went rather unwillingly to a Moravian meeting in London where someone read Luther's introduction to Romans, and in his now famous words, "[at] about a quarter [to] nine, while [I heard Luther] describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed." He had been converted by God's grace.

- **Karl Barth:** Then, of course, there is the great thinker Karl Barth in the 20th century. Romans is essentially what turned Barth from a liberal scholar into an orthodox theologian. It was through Romans that he discovered the saving grace of God.

So, these four famous scholars, and the movements that began as a result of their conversions, testify to the power of this monumental letter. And, did you hear the theme through all four? The grace of God.

They all, like Paul, got new starts through the grace of God. They were all lost as wretches, "but God" found them. They were blind and then they could see. Amazing Grace how sweet the sound.

VII. Conclusion

So, what can we expect from our journey through Romans? Reflecting on those four famous testimonies, the great scholar FF Bruce said this,

"There is no telling what may happen when people begin to study the [letter] to the Romans. What happened to Augustine, Luther, Wesley and Barth launched great spiritual movements which have left their mark on world history. But, similar things have happened much more frequently to very ordinary people as the words of this [letter] came home to them with power. So, be prepared, Bruce says, for the consequences of [journeying] further. You have been warned" (Stott MP3).

You have been warned! The Gospel of God, reflecting God's unconditional love and grace through Jesus Christ, for all humanity in all seasons of life is a powerful force. For it's a whole new world order! It brings into being a whole new order of existence. It changes lives and changes the world. You have been warned.

Amen.

VIII. Benediction

Now receive this benediction:

*For by grace you have been saved through faith;
This is not of your doing, it is the free gift of God.*

So, go now in –

*[That] grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit...*
(Eph 2:8; 2 Cor 13:14)

Resources

Barclay, William, *The Letter to the Romans*

Gorman, Michael J, *Romans: A Theological and Pastoral Commentary*

Stott, John, *Romans: God's Good News for the World*

Stott, John, *God and the Gospel: Romans 1-8 (Regent College MP3)*

Thielman, Frank, *Romans (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT)*