



THE MAN AND HIS MESSAGE

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE AND GLORY

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Romans 1:1-6

First Message

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In his book *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Dallas Willard writes:

How many people are radically and permanently repelled from the way by Christians who are unfeeling, stiff, unapproachable, boring, lifeless, obsessive and dissatisfied? Yet such Christians are everywhere; and what they are missing is the wholesome liveliness springing up from a balanced vitality within God's loving rule. Spirituality wrongly understood or pursued is a major source of human misery and rebellion against God.¹

Many of you have seen the musical version of Victor Hugo's masterpiece *Les Miserables*, the story of the triumph of God's gracious love over human raggedness. John Ortberg, in his book *Love Beyond Reason*, summarizes the story this way:

The escaped convict Jean Valjean, imprisoned for twenty years because he stole a loaf of bread, is shown hospitality by a bishop. But the temptation is too much; he takes some of the bishop's silver and steals away into the night. Stopped by a constable he tries to lie his way out of trouble: The silver was a gift, he says. The constable takes him back to the bishop and Jean Valjean waits to hear the words that will return him to prison until he dies. Nothing in his life prepared him for what he is about to hear.

"You are mistaken," the bishop says to Valjean. "Of course this silver was my gift. But only part. You forgot the most valuable part. You forgot to take the silver candlesticks."

Jean Valjean waits for the condemnation that he knows he deserves. Instead he is blindsided by grace. One moment he faces poverty and prison, the next freedom and abundance. Before Valjean leaves, the bishop says to him, "You must never forget this moment. Your soul and your life have been bought back. You are not your own. From now on, you belong to God."

And because of grace, Jean Valjean's life becomes an act of love. He honors the promise given to a dying prostitute: he devotes himself to raising her child, Cosette. Later he faces danger to save the man who loves Cosette, even though he knows it may mean living life alone.

Opposed to Jean Valjean is a man committed to the law, to "spirituality wrongly understood"; the constable Jauvert. Jauvert is convinced of his own right-

eousness. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. He is a champion of morality and justice. He spends his life seeking to recapture Jean Valjean.

Let us give Jauvert his day in court. He believes in many good things. He is committed to truth. He wants wrongdoing stamped out. He desires a society without thievery or deceit or corruption. He makes personal sacrifices to pursue such a society. He sincerely believes himself to be an agent of good.

In his world, though, there is no room for grace. And because he is blind to his own need for grace, his capacity to love withers and dies. He cannot offer mercy. The crisis of his existence occurs when Jean Valjean risks his own life to save that of Jauvert, his relentless pursuer. But Jauvert cannot bring himself to receive grace. He despairs. He kills himself, rather than admit the truth: his own raggedness has been as great as that of the criminals he devoted his life to punishing.

In the end it is Valjean, the convict, who is able to love. He comes to see what is expressed so beautifully in the musical *Les Miz*: "To love another person is to see the face of God."²

The book of Romans is one of the most powerful and influential documents that has ever been written. Our Judeo-Christian ethic comes largely from this letter, written by the apostle Paul. Romans has changed the face of Western civilization. It has been the means and the force behind some of the most significant conversions in church history.

Augustine, the great philosopher and theologian, was converted by reading just a few verses from the 13th chapter of Romans. Martin Luther, the great reformer, was a professor of exegesis at Wittenburg University. He was a brilliant, confused young man, but this letter ignited his soul and triggered the Reformation. In his preface to his commentary on Romans Luther wrote:

This epistle represents the fundamental teachings of the New Testament and is the very purest Gospel, well worth not only to be memorized verbatim but also to be used daily by every Christian as the daily bread of his soul. For no one could ever exhaust this epistle by study and meditation. The better one becomes acquainted with it, the higher one will treasure it and all the more delight in it.

John Wesley, listening to a reading of Luther's preface to his commentary on Romans, found his own heart

strangely warmed, and out of that came the great evangelical awakening of the eighteenth century. John Bunyan, studying Romans in the Bedford jail, was so caught up by the themes of this great letter that he penned the immortal classic *Pilgrim's Progress*, which has taught so many believers how a Christian relates to the world.

If you don't know or understand Romans, it is my prayer that this letter will become everyday reading for you. It will provide nourishment for your soul.

The Book of Acts doesn't give any information about how the church at Rome was founded. It was probably started by a group of Jews who went to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. Listening to Peter's message that day, they became believers, returned to Rome and started the church. There may have been as many as five house churches in the city. The church had been established for several years by the time this letter was written (14:14; 15:23). The faith of that group of first century Christians became known throughout the world. They had a tremendous impact upon Rome and indeed the Roman Empire.

The structure of the book is easy to follow. It has three benedictions, the first comes at the end of chapter 8; the second at the end of chapter 11; and the third at the end of chapter 16. Paul divides the book into three sections, and each section is sub-divided.

The first two and a half chapters, 1:1–3:20, deal with *sin*.

Paul writes, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." He means every one of us, bar none. We are sinful to the depth of our being. The proof is that we all die, because death is the result of sin.

The second two and a half chapters, 3:21–5:21, deal with *salvation*.

At 3:21, there is an abrupt change in the thought. Paul says, "But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested." The situation is critical: We are all going to hell. But now, the righteousness of God has been revealed. And from 3:21 through 5:21, Paul declares the truth about our Lord's mighty saving acts.

The next three chapters, 6:1–8:39, deal with *sanctification*.

These chapters help us understand how to grow as Christians, how to deal with the entrenched sin in our lives, the long-term habits that hold us in their grasp.

The next three chapters, 9:1–11:36, deal with *sovereignty*.

These chapters discuss the nation of Israel and their place in God's plan to bring salvation to the world. And we use the term sovereignty, because the emphasis in these three chapters is on God's sovereign election of his people.

Then, beginning with chapter 12, the next two and a half chapters, 12:1–15:13, deal with *service*.

These chapters set out what it means to respond to

the grace of God in service. Chapter 12 begins with the word "therefore." Paul writes, "Therefore, by the mercies of God, present your bodies as a living sacrifice."

Finally, the last one and a half chapters are *salutations*.

In these verses Paul greets a number of people in Rome.

John Stott gives another way to break this book down:

1:1–3:20 deals with the wrath of God;
3:21–8:39 deals with the grace of God;
9:1–11:36 deals with the plan of God;
12:1–15:13 deals with the will of God.³

The introduction to the book extends through verse 17, but we will take the text only through verse 6 this morning. Paul begins the letter in the customary format of his time. Today we address the person we are writing to first and identify ourselves at the end of the letter. In the ancient world, however, the custom was to reverse the order. Paul follows that format, but deviates from it somewhat in that he gives a much more elaborate description of himself than was normal for the time. Since he didn't found the church, perhaps he felt the need to establish his credentials.

The apostle's opening words are very instructive. Verse 1:

Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God (NASB)

Paul says three things about himself. First, he is a "bond-servant of Jesus Christ." The apostle knew that everyone has to serve somebody. He dispels the myth of neutrality, the notion that somehow we can take the middle ground and not serve either side. That is not an option. We are either going to serve the Lord Jesus Christ and be his slave, or serve the evil one and be a slave to our own passions. Isn't it astonishing that this wonderfully productive apostle views himself as a slave of Christ? No matter who we are, whether a pastor, teacher, software engineer or corporation president, if we are to be productive in God's eyes, we must be servants. This is what Jesus said of himself: "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve" (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45). Paul says he chose to serve the Lord Jesus. That can be true of all of us.

The next thing the apostle says is not true of all of us, however. Paul says he was "called to be an apostle." That is a unique calling. By New Testament definition, the apostles were men who had seen the resurrected Lord and been sent out by him to speak with his authority. They had the same role as the Old Testament prophets: the prophets wrote the Old Testament, and the apostles wrote the New Testament.

This two-fold designation as "slave" and "apostle" is particularly striking when these words are contrasted with one another. "Slave" is a characterization of great humility. The word expresses Paul's sense of personal

insignificance. He was without rights of his own, having been purchased to belong to Christ. "Apostle," on the other hand, is a title of great authority. It expresses his sense of official privilege and dignity by reason of his appointment by Jesus Christ.

The third thing that Paul says about himself in this opening verse is that he has been "set apart for the gospel of God." We have drained away much of the meaning of this word gospel. It means, simply, good news. Many who call themselves Christians are unfamiliar with the good news, however. They call themselves Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Baptists, Roman Catholics or whatever, but they don't know the good news. To them, the Christian truth that they know is not good news at all; it is a burden, a form of piety that is unrealistic and obnoxious.

But the gospel is the good news about God, the good news that he is doing something about the mess we have made with the world and our own lives. God is accomplishing great things right in the midst of everything that appears to be going wrong. Our government is in moral chaos. Marriages are falling apart. Amidst all the ugliness and turmoil of our world, however, God has done something right. That is the theme of this introduction. Six times in this opening chapter Paul uses this word "gospel." Whenever we come to it I would like you to translate it "good news," because that is what it is.

Paul underscores a number of things about this good news, this gospel. First, notice that it originates with God. It is the "gospel of God." The apostles did not invent it; it was revealed and entrusted to them by God. This is crucial to our spreading the good news. John Stott reminds us that what we have to share with others is not a collection of human speculations, one more religion to add to the list. In fact, it isn't a religion at all. It is, rather, the "gospel of God," God's own good news for a lost world. Without this conviction evangelism is separated of its content, purpose and drive.

And it wasn't an afterthought, says Paul. Verse 2:

which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures,

The "holy Scriptures" is Paul's term for the Old Testament. He is saying that when God revealed the good news to the apostles, it did not come to them as a complete novelty, because God had already promised it through his prophets in the Old Testament Scriptures. There is an essential continuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Jesus himself made it clear that the Scriptures bore witness to him; that he was the Son of Man in Daniel 7 and the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53. In the book of Acts, Peter quotes the Old Testament in reference to Jesus' resurrection and exaltation. Also, in Acts Paul reasons with people from the Scriptures, that the Christ must suffer and die, and that he was Jesus.

Way back when Adam and Eve made that fateful de-

cision that threw the world into sin, right then God made the promise that a seed would come to set everything right. And throughout the entire Old Testament, as C.S. Lewis observed, "The leaves rustle with hope." Over and over we hear the refrain, "a man is coming, a savior is coming!" He will be a Semite. He will be an Israelite. He will be from the Tribe of Judah. He will be one of David's descendants. He will be born in Bethlehem. He will live in Nazareth. He will sojourn in Egypt. He will suffer and die. He will rise again. Each one of these events is written about in the Old Testament. Everyone was looking forward to the One who was coming. The gospel was "promised beforehand."

This leads us to Paul's next observation, namely, that the essence of the gospel is Jesus Christ. Look at verses 3-4:

concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord,

John Stott writes:

If we bring verses 1 and 3 together, by omitting the parenthesis of verse 2, we are left with the statement that Paul was set apart for the gospel of God *regarding his Son*. For the gospel of God is 'the gospel of his Son' (9). God's good news is about Jesus. As Luther [wrote]: 'Here the door is thrown open wide for the understanding of Holy Scripture, that is, everything must be understood in relation to Christ.' Calvin [wrote]: 'The whole gospel is contained in Christ.'⁴

You can take Mohammed out of Islam and the message of Islam remains. You can take Buddha out of Buddhism and his message retains its integrity. But remove Jesus Christ from the gospel and you destroy it. That is because Jesus *is* the gospel. Jesus Christ is absolutely central and indispensable to Christianity. Christianity was never meant to be an intolerable religion of rules and ritual, which it had become by Luther's time, and by which he had been enslaved until he read this book of Romans. Christianity is a person, Jesus Christ, who came to earth to do for man what man could not do for himself.

Who is this Jesus? Paul describes this Son in two contrasting clauses: "who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh," and "who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord."

These clauses stress both the humanity and deity of Jesus. Humanly, he was a descendant of David. As the son of David he had the right to sit on the throne of Israel; and as the Son of God he has the right to sit on the throne of the universe. That is the point he is making. "Son of God" is a messianic title. Jesus has been exalted to sit at the Father's right hand. He is the One who came to set things right; and by the resurrection, God

affirmed that he had indeed set things right, and he was exalted to the place of authority.

John Stott summarizes it this way:

So here is a balanced statement of both the humiliation and the exaltation, the weakness and the power of God's Son, his human descent traced to David, his divine sonship-in-power established by the resurrection and gift of the Spirit. Moreover, this unique person, seed of David and Son of God, weak and powerful, incarnate and exalted, is *Jesus* (a human historical figure), *Christ* (the Messiah of Old Testament Scripture), *our Lord*, who owns and rules our lives.⁵

The third thing that Paul says about the gospel is that it extends to all nations. Verses 5-6:

through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles, for His name's sake, among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ;

Paul says he received from God "grace and apostleship." He links those two together because he always saw his apostleship as an undeserved privilege, a gracious decision on God's part. Remember what Paul was doing at the time of his conversion. He was on his way up to Damascus with oaths on his lips to persecute Christians. He hated Christians. He hated Christ. And the Lord stopped him along the way and expressed his love for him. It was grace that knocked him down that day. Grace was the light that blinded him, and grace was the power that took the scales away from his eyes. Paul never got over the wonder and power of that grace. Grace became his invocation, his benediction, and everything in between. Grace is what brought him to his knees over his sin, and grace is what took his sin away.

On that day Paul discovered, as John Newton was to discover centuries later,

*Amazing grace! how sweet the sound—
That saved a wretch like me!*

When we were in Ghana last year, a number of us had the opportunity to visit the castles where millions of African men and women were kept before they were sold into slavery. It was a very moving experience. They say that somewhere between sixty and a hundred million people were captured and sold as slaves, but only about twenty million of them survived the cruel voyage to the Americas.

John Newton was a slave trader. When at last he was confronted with the gospel, he could hardly believe that God could love a wretch like him: "Amazing grace! how sweet the sound—That saved a wretch like me!" That was Paul. He was on his way to kill Christians, and the Lord loved him on the way.

Paul, of course, thought God loved him because he merited being loved. And why not? After all, in Philipians he wrote this lofty description of himself: "circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless" (Phil. 3:5-6). Paul felt God was getting a good deal. He was like Jauvert. He had devoted his life to pursuing and punishing people who were not devoted to the law as he was. He was sure of what he believed and passionately committed to his values.

But something was missing from his life: he had no grace. It was only when he saw Jesus face to face that God opened his eyes to see that this One he had imagined to be a misguided street preacher was, in fact, God incarnate. When Paul changed his view of Jesus, he changed his view of himself. Henceforth, the proud Saul would become the humble Paul, the slave of Christ. Paul went on his way, preaching the gospel, the good news of that grace. He preached the gospel to the Gentiles, that is, to everybody. It was that good news that liberated from all his prejudices and pride of race, nation, tribe, caste and class.

That is what I desire for us as we study through this marvelous letter: that God might meet us in our need, and show us his marvelous grace.

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¹ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989) 80-81.

² John Ortberg, *Love Beyond Reason* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 136-137.

³ John Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994) 36-43.

⁴ Stott, *Romans*, 49.

⁵ Stott, *Romans*, 51.