

GREAT NEWS FOR THE HELPLESS



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Romans 1:1-7
First Message
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One of the plagues of the human spirit today is the feeling of helplessness. We especially sense this when we go to work on Monday mornings. We feel unable to make a significant impact on life. In spite of our so-called technological revolution, surveys tell us that people feel more and more that the individual does not matter. When we see the allegedly powerful people, politicians, judges or whoever, seemingly unable to alter the course of history, we begin to think that ordinary folk cannot influence the evil that is so strong and so deeply entrenched in society. A member of the English House of Lords recently commented, "The business of surviving and enjoying our leisure is all we are prepared to do."

This same syndrome has deeply eroded the faith of many Christians. We too can lapse into the same state of helplessness. Yet a biblical understanding of history will tell us that that feeling is an illusion. The apostle Paul never felt this way. If you do, it is a sign that you either do not understand the gospel or that you do not believe its implications.

We are going to embark on a journey through the book of Romans that will take us through the most systematic presentation of the gospel ever penned. Its author is the apostle Paul, a Jew from Tarsus. After his conversion, when he met Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul was commissioned to take the gospel to the Gentile world. He took this call from Jesus Christ seriously. Between 47 and 57 A.D., he planted churches in cities all around the Aegean Sea.

In the winter of 56, Paul settled down in Corinth at the house of a friend named Gaius. There he collected all of the offerings from the churches to relieve those suffering from the famine in Jerusalem. You would think that after all that effort the apostle would buy a lakeside cabin and retire.

Not Paul! He still had plans for pioneering. He had a hunger in his heart to go to Spain, the western-most province of the Roman Empire. On his way to Spain, he thought he could visit Rome, something he had always dreamed of doing. Although he was a Roman citizen, he had never seen the capital city. And during his visit, he was thrilled by the thought of enjoying the fellowship of these new house churches established in the city.

In the early days of 57 A.D., therefore, Paul dictated this letter to his friend Tertius. He wanted to prepare the Roman Christians for his visit, and to put in writing a full statement of the gospel as he understood it. He had two purposes in mind: Wherever he went, his enemies tried to discredit his ministry and his gospel. And second, he wanted these Roman Christians to enter into his ministry through prayer and to share in their spiritual gifts.

We now know of course that from the day this letter was delivered in Rome it began to change the course of Western civilization. When people understand this epistle, it puts a fire in their hearts. The book of Romans freed the heart of Martin Lu-

ther, a Catholic monk who struggled with spiritual bondage for years. On the advice of a close friend, Luther taught this material. As he studied Romans 1 through 3, he was delivered, his spirit set free. This book became the cornerstone of the Reformation.

Two hundred years later, the young John Wesley was influenced by this book of Romans. He had returned to London from Georgia where he had failed miserably as a missionary. Dejected, he reluctantly attended a Society meeting at Aldersgate Street. The man leading the study that day merely read the preface of Luther's commentary to the book of Romans. That alone converted Wesley. He later commented, "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." Wesley and George Whitefield later were very influential in the "Great Awakening" in America. The book of Romans had changed two continents.

These are but two examples of people who had a profound impact upon society because of their understanding of this book. On a personal note, I will be forever indebted to David Roper, a former pastor in Peninsula Bible Church, who faithfully taught me from this book during my college years. I must say that after almost nineteen years of study, I have not been able to improve upon that foundation. It is my prayer for you that this book will be as beneficial in your life as it has been in so many others.

In the first seven verses of the book, the apostle Paul lays forth the gospel in the historic progression in which it came. Here we discover four key aspects of the gospel of God. First, it began in the mind of God: Paul gives the historical roots of the gospel. Second, the gospel came into history in the person of Jesus Christ: Paul tells about the content of the gospel. Third, once the gospel came, there had to be messengers who witnessed it, and were then commissioned to proclaim it: Paul tells about these messengers. Finally, these messengers were to take this gospel to all nations: Paul ends his introduction by telling about the recipients of the gospel.

Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning His Son, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, who was declared to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord, 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; to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father

and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I. THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE GOSPEL 1:2

...the gospel of God, which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures...

Before anyone can make a significant contribution in life, he must know where he came from and where he is going. Our generation has lost our historical roots. Part of the problem is the growing number of broken homes. Children from broken homes feel they cannot bring significance to anything because no one cares enough about them to provide them with continuity in their lives. As a result, they feel helpless to make a contribution.

Another factor is that our educational system no longer imparts a sense of community history to the student's mind. The emphasis is solely on the present. This is Professor Bloom's thesis in his new book *The Closing of the American Mind*, an indictment of our system of education. He maintains that our minds closed precisely when they became opened; they became so open to every new idea that we lost our commitment to truth. As a result, we have lost our historical and ethical moorings. We do not know where we have been and we do not know where we are going.

If you feel helpless because you have no roots, the gospel's good news is that God cared enough to give you roots. Significance in life does not come by eking out your own existence and making a name for yourself. Rather, significance comes from being a part of what God is doing, a work which began in eternity past, then entered into human history, and is being fulfilled today.

These roots can be traced in Scripture. The first announcement of the gospel came immediately after Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden. God announced that through the woman's womb a seed would come who would bruise the serpent's head. The prophets picked up on this theme and revealed that the seed would come to Israel through the line of David. The first time the term "gospel" is used is in Isaiah 52:7:

**How lovely on the mountains
Are the feet of him who brings good news,
Who announces peace
And brings good news of happiness,
Who announces salvation,
And says to Zion, "Your God reigns!"**

These words were spoken in the context of the Babylonian captivity. Isaiah was looking forward to the day when the good news would come, when God would break into history to defeat sin and death. This word picture comes from the typical battle scenes of Isaiah's time. Upon winning a victory, messengers would leave the battle and run over the hills to the capital city to announce, "Good news! Victory! Our God is King!" I was studying this once with a rabbi at Stanford University and he told me that the verbal root of this verb word is the Hebrew noun "flesh" (basha). Thus the verb means "to flesh something out." He said, "Of course, you Christians can say the good news is, 'The word became flesh!' We don't believe that." But he was right! This is the gospel: God has become flesh and intervened in history to deal with sin, death and the devil himself. That is such great news that messengers were sent out everywhere!

Paul anchored the gospel into history, first, so that we would know that the good news we preach is not an afterthought of God. It is the fulfillment and the goal of all of history. God was faithful to bring it to pass.

Secondly, we are living in the age of fulfillment. We are part of it! Therefore, our sense of helplessness, of not being important, is unfounded. We do have significance and a purpose. We are grafted into the historical reality of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We are part of what God is doing. We do have a history, because we have been adopted into these roots. The good news we preach therefore is the goal of history, and we are privileged to be a part of it.

Next, Paul moves on to talk about the content of this gospel.

II. THE CONTENT OF THE GOSPEL: HIS SON 1:3-4

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

Part of what contributes to a sense of feeling helpless today is knowing that you have no important relations. You may be talented and have important credentials, for example, but you know you are not a son-in-law of the president of the company. If you are not related to the "makers and shakers," you think you will have no impact despite what contribution you may want to make.

The good news of the gospel, however, is that every Christian is related to the King of kings. The essence of the gospel is not a particular teaching, religious belief, or ethic. It is a Person. The gospel speaks of God's Son "who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, who was declared to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord."

The title "Son" does not refer to Jesus' deity but to his Messianic title as King. In the book of Samuel (2 Sam. 7), God said to David, "You are not going to build my house. I am going to build your house, and from your loins will come a line of boys who will be kings. When each is crowned, I will adopt him into a father-son relationship, a relationship that will be so intimate he will spread the kingdom of God merely by talking to me in prayer." The book of Psalms contains the prayers which the king used to spread God's kingdom. Eighty percent of the Psalms were written by the kings. If you want to enter into the same intimacy and know how these kings, and how Jesus himself prayed, then read the Psalms.

Paul gives Jesus' title as "Son of God," then he tells of two aspects about this King. Jesus had credentials as heir to the throne both according to the flesh and according to the Spirit. One speaks of his humiliation, the other of his exaltation. One explains his weakness, the other his power. Both are necessary so that this King to minister to us.

In the first aspect, we see that Jesus Christ came according to the flesh. He was born in a cave. Because he came in meekness, he was easily missed. He did not enter Jerusalem riding on a stallion. Zachariah said he came on a donkey, even the foal of a

donkey--an animal about the size of a Great Dane! Jesus came into Jerusalem dragging his feet in the dust, mounted upon a donkey foal. What an entrance for the King!

Yet there was a reason for this. It is impossible to have intimacy with someone with whom you cannot empathize. Because Jesus came in meekness according to the flesh, he is able as King to empathize with all of our rejection, pain, and inability to cope. He can weep with us.

But empathy is not enough. This King must be adequate to deal with our problems. This involves the other side of the ministry of Jesus. His work on the cross was so perfect, he was raised from the dead. Having been raised, he now reigns with unlimited power and has been given the gift of the Holy Spirit to pour out to everyone who believes. Not only can he empathize, he can give his Holy Spirit to bring life to the human soul. The apostle emphasizes that this power is not intended to change governments, to bring new legislation, or to select Supreme Court justices. This power is for changing lives. The power of the Holy Spirit changes hearts that are wicked, selfish, and slanderous. Jesus Christ yields the power to bring life to the dead, not only in the resurrection to come but now in our mortal bodies.

Our pastors and elders just returned from an overnight retreat in Monterey. The highlight of the weekend for me came yesterday morning when one of our elders asked us to share the most significant occurrence in our lives last year, and what we are looking forward to in the future. Have you ever wondered what your spiritual leaders talk about? The dominant theme expressed was our inability to cope--whether it involved a sickness, children who were out of control, a deadly disease, problems in marriage, or struggles at work. None of us were certain about the future of our personal lives. Many tears were shed as we all faced our inability to cope. But on the other side, the gospel of Jesus Christ was seen in full view. Jesus was faithful in the midst of all of these troubles. He could empathize, and he could bring life to the soul before the victories came. There is nothing more rewarding than gathering for fellowship around the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The focus of the message we preach is not ethics, a system of beliefs or rules; it is a Person. Jesus is Messiah who came in humility and now is exalted. He is the King with whom we can now have intimacy.

Not only then do we have historical roots we also have intimacy with the King of Kings! The third aspect of the gospel is its messengers, the apostles. Paul describes the ministry of these apostles in verses 1, 5 and 6.

III. THE MESSENGERS OF THE GOSPEL: THE APOSTLES 1:1,5,6

Paul, a bond-servant of Jesus Christ, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, (1)

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 called of Jesus Christ. (5,6)

Paul begins his letter with the words, "Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God,..." Then he talks about Jesus Christ. But in verse 5, he

comes back to himself: "...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;..."

Having a relationship with Christ is not enough. Part of our sense of helplessness in life is due to the fact that we feel aimless. Yes, we have come to faith in Christ, but sometimes the relationship seems to stop there. We do not know how to cultivate it. We do not know what our focus in life should be. We do not know how to make ethical decisions or how to use our spiritual gifts. We do not know what track to run on.

God sent the apostles to help us cultivate our relationship with the King. Therefore, we not only have a subjective relationship, we also have the objective word. And the two come together to bring life for us. This is why Paul always takes time in his epistles to tell us about his function. "Apostle" means "one who is sent forth with the authority of him who sent him."

Messengers can establish or destroy the credibility of their message, depending upon their motives or behavior in executing their office. That is why Paul shares details about himself and the other apostles in their role as messengers.

First, Paul says he was called and set apart for this office. None of the apostles were self-appointed. Paul did not go to seminary with the goal of becoming an apostle. In fact, he spent his life going in the opposite direction and ultimately began to persecute the church of Jesus Christ. Then he was divinely called of God. He did not appoint himself. The same is true with the rest of the gifts given to the church. God calls us and divinely gives us our gifts. We cannot earn them or work for them.

Once Paul was called, he was set apart, consecrated to God. He gave his whole life to be an apostle. Apostleship for him was not something he did on the side while he made his living doing other things. He was a holy man, consecrated to God's use. This gives credibility to his message.

Then he tells us his attitude in being an apostle. He says, "I am a bond-servant of Jesus Christ." In Christian circles, we use the word "servant" as a compliment. But this is not true in the world. Once when I was served well in a restaurant, I said to the waiter, "What a servant you are!" He sneered and said, "Thanks a lot!" "Servant" was not a complimentary term in the Greek culture either. In fact, the term *doulas* was abhorrent to the Greeks. They loved their freedom and individuality.

But in the Old Testament, this title carried high accolades when it was given to God's servants. To illustrate, we find the word used in Exodus 21:5 of slaves. After a slave had performed his time of service for his master and was about to be set free, he could say, "I don't want to be free. I love my master, and I want to continue to serve him." A ring was then placed in the servant's ear as a symbol that he had given his heart and service freely to his master. Paul so appreciated the fact that Jesus Christ set him free, he gave his life to Christ as a bond-servant in return.

Finally, the apostle tells of the purpose behind his office. It was "to bring about obedience of faith among all the nations," in other words, to place others into an intimate relationship by faith with Christ, with the result that they would obey Him. There was no other motivation for the apostle's life. He did not go

about seeking to build a personal empire. In fact, with all the churches Paul founded, he could have created his own denomination. Instead, once the churches were founded, he charged elders to run those independent churches under the divine guidance of the Holy Spirit. Paul did not want people following him; he always pointed them to the Lord.

What did the apostle gain from all of this? Nothing! He was beaten and persecuted. He lost his reputation. He was whipped three times. He was stoned, shipwrecked, and lost in the deep. Finally, he was beheaded. I am always amazed at how quickly people will listen to other messengers with shady backgrounds. They have less than pure motives; they merely want to establish personal empires. If you read about the founders of all the cults from the 1800's, you will discover that every one of them had a questionable background. And they were always setting up empires. Their name was to be considered equal to if not more important than the name of God. But this is not true of the apostles.

Every generation is to feed on the words of the apostles for they are credible messengers. You can trust these men because they gave up everything to give us the message. These messengers are important because they set forth the apostolic word by which we are able to cultivate intimacy with the King. We have historical roots, and we have an intimate relationship with the King. Then we are told how to cultivate the relationship. All of our aimlessness will disappear if we read the words of the apostles.

Finally, Paul gives the fourth aspect of the gospel: the recipients of the gospel in verse 7.

IV. THE RECIPIENTS OF THE GOSPEL 1:7 ...to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

One of my favorite Jewish authors is Chaim Potok. He has written many novels about how modern Judaism tries to cope with the twentieth century world. In his *Book of Lights*, he writes about a Jewish chaplain serving during the Korean War. The story is about the inner turmoil this man faces when his orthodoxy and rituals come face to face with the religions and customs of the East. He is not sure that his traditions and rituals are relevant to these people, and if this is true, how could his be a universal message? In the end he makes a trip to Hiroshima. This is especially touching for him because his father helped develop the A-bomb for the Manhattan Project. In the end, he is not sure how much his traditions have contributed to mankind.

These are issues we must face as Christians. Is the gospel we preach a provincial, narrow, Silicon Valley-type religion, or is it a gospel with no cultural trappings that is available to every hu-

man soul? Paul makes the latter claim. "My gospel is universal," he says.

Because the gospel gives spiritual gifts to the soul of anyone who receives the message, it is universal. It addresses the deepest needs in the heart and soul of all men. The first gift God gives is the gift of worth. Paul calls these Christians "beloved." He does not mention any ritual or qualification connected with the gift. He merely says they are loved.

Paul says the next quality or gift is purpose. These Christians are called "saints." In the Old Testament, the dominant motivation for the people was the fear of the Lord. In the New Testament, though the fear is still there, the accent shifts to love. Love is the strongest motivator in the world.

For gymnastics in high school, I had a coach whose specialty was football. As a Christian, he loved me and treated me like a son. Even though he did not have all the technical skills, I felt set apart as a gymnast because he loved me. I gave my heart to working with him. His love motivated me.

Our text says that every Christian, when he is touched by the love of God, then gives his life to God and becomes a saint. "Saint" means "holy." Did you wonder why so many people followed the Pope while he was here? What is so intriguing about the man? I think people want to see a holy man. People want to observe someone whose life is consecrated to God.

In the Old Testament, there was an ascending scale of holiness. Only Jews could enter the temple. Then just a few people were allowed into the Holy place. And only one man, the high priest, went inside the Holy of Holies once a year. Only certain people were totally consecrated to God. But Zechariah had a vision in which he saw that all the utensils in Israel, not just the consecrated vessels, would be holy. Even the slop bucket used for garbage and the bells on the horses' garments would be holy to the Lord. This was a prophetic way of saying that God's holiness will be so extensive in the age to come that he will own everything.

The fulfillment of this is in the saints of Christ. We do not have to be a pope or pastor. We are all to be consecrated to God. And God wants all of our lives, not just a day or an hour of our time. And we have the same personal relationship with Jesus Christ which the apostle Paul had. None of the cults can dare make such an offer. In Christ we are all saints! We can say, as the Samaritans told the Samaritan woman, "It is no longer because of your faith that we believe, for we have now heard for ourselves and know that this one is indeed the Savior of the world."

What more do we need in life? The gospel gives us roots, for God cared enough to give continuity to our lives, grafting us into the promises with his gospel. He then gives us intimacy which answers the deepest craving of our hearts. He gives us a track to run on with the apostles to cultivate this relationship. And we have a purpose for living because we are totally consecrated to God as messengers of good news.

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