

All Roads Lead Here: Grace To You And Peace

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Psalm 4; John 1:16-18; Romans 1:1-7

Our final reading today comes from Romans 1:1-7. May God add His blessings to the reading of His holy Word. “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be 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 descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Today we start our study of possibly the most influential book within the most influential book in the world. Romans has captivated men and women across the centuries and led them to a deep appreciation of who God is, our relationship with God, and what God is done to change that relationship over time. If we study it well and God works in our hearts, we will be forever changed through it. That’s both promising a lot and demanding a lot of us – but I know God will be moving as we look at this book.

So let’s dive right in. Up first this week is Paul’s greeting, which surprises us how rich it is. Normally you can’t talk for twenty-five minutes about a greeting – but Paul’s words, inspired by God, are no normal greeting. Now the greeting might also surprise us because it’s so different from how we would address a letter. But you have to know a culture to know how their mail works. Have you ever sent a letter overseas? You’re lucky if you don’t have to write the address in a character-based language like Japanese or Arabic. Even if you write someone in the English-speaking world, you have to know how to get your mail there. British and Australians don’t have zip codes; they have postal codes. In Britain, you put down the county because they don’t have states. So my address would be 53 West Breitmeyer Place, Mount Clemens, Macomb. And in Britain, the return address goes on the back of the envelope.

Every nation and culture has their own way of doing things. In the ancient Near East, letters were delivered by hand. They were sealed and then sent by a messenger. No envelope. And have you ever gotten a piece of mail without a return address? It always makes us leery, right? Either it’s a scam letter or somebody doesn’t want us to know who they are beforehand. So the first thing Paul does is state who he is. That way, there’s no question that it’s his note.

But it’s not just “From Paul, To The Romans.” Paul gives a description of himself that leads into a description of what he’s doing and why. Paul does this for a number of reasons, partially because he didn’t plant the church in Rome and they don’t officially know him. But other parts of it establish Paul’s identity in surprising ways.

The first thing Paul says is that he is a servant of Christ Jesus. “Servant” is misleading, but the word “slave” in our culture brings up the awful thoughts of American slavery. We’ve talked about what it meant to be a slave in Roman culture before. But Paul uses this term to note exactly what he is. Two things: first off, he is not free to do as he would choose. He is under the orders of Jesus and must do what Jesus says. But second, He’s also not the slave of anybody else. He is not a slave to sin or evil or any other master. He exclusively belongs to Jesus.

Now I haven’t put points in the sermon notes in the bulletin because Paul covers a whole lot of ground in Romans. So we’ll discuss what he says and you can make notes as you see fit. (And I encourage you to bring your Bibles so that you can follow along). One we have here is this: *becoming slaves of Jesus is what His followers do*. This is the best thing in the world.

We make bad decisions all the time. I eat too much. I sometimes choose to watch and listen to things that I want rather than things that glorify God. If I were on my own, if I were not under God’s protection and provision, if I did not belong to God (which is what being a slave here means – being owned by God), then I would spiral down the staircase of sin headlong. In a couple of weeks, Paul will talk about that very thing. But belonging to God, being under His command, is the only way we can truly do the right thing – to glorify Him with our actions, to become righteous, to act in ways that please God.

If I don’t serve God, I serve myself, and ultimately, I serve sin. But if I serve God, then I have the option. I can disobey – which all of us do from time to time, though we should hate it more and more – but I can also obey. The person who belongs to sin, who is a slave to sin, has no choice. They sin as a part of their very nature. Even the nice things they do come out of ulterior motives rather than righteous motives. But when we belong to God, we can actually follow Him. We can become more like Him. We want to imitate Paul here as slaves of Jesus.

Next thing: Paul is called to be an apostle. This puts two opposites together. On the one hand, he’s a slave, the lowest of the low. On the other hand, he’s an apostle, the highest calling in the church. In the early church, as we see in the book of Acts, there were three key things that identified most of the apostles – being a disciple of Christ during His earthly ministry, being an eyewitness to the resurrection, and having a call to be a uniquely special kind of witness about Jesus. Only a very small group of people qualified.

Paul fails on the first two points, but the third is clearly true. On the road to Damascus, when Paul was imprisoning Christians and having them executed, he has a vision of the risen Jesus who gives him his new marching orders. And it is clear that God put the call of an apostle on Paul, because he gave up everything in his former life and risked his life over and over again to spread Christianity throughout the Roman world. He had the ability to do miraculous healings and signs that showed the power of God.

But Paul isn’t an apostle because he’s worthy of the job. In 1 Corinthians 15:9 he says he is the least of the apostles because he persecuted the church before coming to faith. In 2 Corinthians 12:11, he says he is not inferior to any apostles, even though he personally is nothing, a nobody. Paul didn’t deserve the job. God chose Him for the job.

This brings us back to our own lives for a moment, a second point to contemplate: *what has God called you to do in His church?* What's your ministry? God has given you special gifts and talents to build up the body of believers and make it grow. Do it to the best of your ability, and don't worry if it doesn't seem that important. If God has made you a musician, practice and lead us well! If your gift is hospitality, help us get our new Meal and a Movie Night moving well, sign up for more coffee hours, and help us host people in our homes to introduce them to Jesus. If God has given you the resources for stewardship, give freely and generously!

God promises you these kinds of gifts. And if you have no clue, if you're like, "I just come to church because I'm supposed to but I have no idea what my calling is," be brave and talk to me and we will figure out together. If you need more equipping to carry out God's call, talk to me. Let's work it out! We have callings just like Paul did – we are all called in particular ways so God is glorified in us. Let's know our callings and live them out!

The next thing Paul says is that he has been set apart for the gospel of God. As an apostle, he has been uniquely called out to spread the word of God. He's a super-missionary. But notice this: he's set apart for the gospel, which means "the good news," of God. He has been appointed, chosen, and set aside as a representative, an ambassador, of God's good news. This is not **his** good news; it's **God's** good news, the gospel of God from God. He's not claiming anything of himself – he's only the messenger of the good news that comes from God.

That's for us today too: *the good news belongs to God, not us*. Because when we think about telling others about CrossWay or about Jesus or God, you might start to get that feeling in the pit of your stomach. I'm just an ordinary person; why should they listen to me? Why is what I have to say more important than what they already believe? What right do I have to interfere with their way of thinking and living?

Here's the thing: it's not about us. God's good news is for us; it saves us; it delivers us. But it's not about us. It's not about how God fits into **our** plans. It's about **God** and how we fit into **His** glorious plans. Are any of us all that important to listen to? No. There's nothing about me that makes me more worthy to listen to than anybody else. There are better speakers than me, more convincing, more intelligent, just plain more interesting.

But the good news isn't ours. It's God's good news. We can be confident because the good news isn't my opinion. The good news is God's rescue plan. It is true whether the whole world thinks it is or not. When we share the good news of God, it's not about us. It's about God. The best thing we can do is get out of the way. We don't need to be afraid. Whether that news is received well or not is out of our hands. It's not about us. We want it to be believed because it's true. We don't want someone to believe in God merely because they're our friends. When we move or have less time, they might follow away. We want them to believe because we care about them and because the good news of God determines their eternal future.

So what is this gospel? What is the good news? The first thing we learn isn't the good news itself, but that the good news Paul is about to tell us about is reliable. Why is the good news trustworthy? "[God] promised [the good news] beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures."

We believe the good news because it didn't come out of nowhere. Christianity isn't based on what one guy said about God or a personal revelation he alone had. The good news of God has been promised in many books, written in many centuries by many different authors, telling about many different people who received the promise that the good news was coming. It was predicted by the prophets and written down in Scripture so future generations would know this didn't come out of thin air. The good news is the culmination of everything God had promised for over four thousand years.

Now we get to the good news itself – the good news “concerns God's Son.” The good news of God is wrapped up in Jesus. There is no good news outside of Jesus. Every good tidings, good promise, good purpose for us God has is wrapped up in His Son. God's good news **is** Jesus. God's good news cannot be separated from Jesus. The good news that we are saved from our disobedience against God only makes sense when we realize that not only are we saved **by** Jesus but **for** Jesus. We are saved not so we can have a better life but so we can have Jesus – so we can live forever, permanently, eternally in perfect union and relationship with God in Jesus.

How do we know that Jesus is actually the guy we were promised? Paul tells us. Jesus “was descended from David according to the flesh.” This means two things. First, Jesus is uniquely qualified to be the Messiah because He is one of the very few people in history who can fulfill the promises God declared to His prophets. He's a genuine possibility. But second, Jesus is man. That phrase “according to the flesh” means that Jesus was not merely pretending. He was fully human. The word *sarx* in Greek, flesh, establishes the weakness of being human. It tells us that Jesus lowered Himself to our level. He made Himself nothing to lift us up.

But the story doesn't end there. Jesus “was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead.” This doesn't mean that Jesus wasn't always the eternal Son of God before time began. It means this: the Holy Spirit both raised Jesus from the dead and declared that Jesus is ruling and reigning over the Kingdom given to Him by His Father. Where once Jesus was the “Son of God in weakness,” serving us even to the point of death on a cross, Jesus is now the “Son of God in power.”

Jesus' resurrection proves His claims to be the unique, eternal Son of the eternal Father. The resurrection is the evidence we need to know that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the Messianic promises. The Holy Spirit works in our hearts to convince us of the truth of the resurrection and to remind us that we are saved. Jesus' resurrection proves His rule and reign over all things. Jesus is fully human and He is fully God, the eternal one who rescues us.

Paul continues to tell us what Jesus has done. It's through Jesus that “we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith.” Because of what Jesus did, we live in grace. We don't get the punishment we actually deserve, and we receive blessings we don't deserve, all because Jesus sets us right with the Father. And the gifts of the Holy Spirit, for Paul the gift of apostleship, come because Jesus sent Him. We live in God's favor because of Jesus.

There's a reason we are given grace and our unique gifting and callings – "to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ." We exist to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. We don't exist to work, to earn money, to play. We are here to glorify God. The obedience of faith is for the sake of Jesus' name. We obey Jesus, we live in faith, we extend kindness and love to strangers and those who are hard to love, we do difficult things God calls us to do, to honor Jesus' name.

And faith isn't something just for one set of people. Faith in Jesus is meant to be found in every nation, among every people group. We've had a rough year with deep divides over politics, but it was nothing like the ancient world. Blood feuds existed between various tribes and cultures. The Jews hated the Romans, and the Romans didn't much care for them either. Barbarians and cretins – we've heard those words as insults for brutes and people with little intelligence, right? They come from this era. The people of Crete were stereotyped by their own poets, and Paul said the poets were right! The word "barbarian" was used derogatively of anybody who didn't speak Greek and know Greek culture. The Israeli/Palestinian conflict that rages on today is rooted in rivalries that existed before Jesus' era! Yet the gospel, the good news of salvation in Jesus, is for everyone and brings those different groups together.

For us, that means that we must work to get along. We do not all have the same ethnic background or social background or political stances or work history. We probably don't have a ton in common. But we have the one important thing, the only important thing, in common, and that's Jesus. Why do we strive to get along despite our differences? For the name of our Savior Jesus Christ, for His glory. When we show the world that we can love each other when we disagree about things of this world, when we set them aside to care about each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, it glorifies our Lord. It is obedience to Him.

Finally, Paul tells us who the letter is for: "To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints." Does that mean we're reading mail meant for someone else? Yes and no. We must always look at the letter in the context of its original recipients – people living in Rome around the late 50s AD. But Paul means it for those who are loved by God and called to be saints. That's all of us here. It is for us as well as them.

Here's what Paul wants for them and for us: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." That's what Paul goes to great lengths to describe in this letter, and it's his prayer for all of us – that we would know the grace of God and the peace that comes from it. That God might pour out His grace on us, that because of His Son, He might extend His hand of mercy to us and save us from ourselves and our disobedience. That we might have the peace of God that passes all understanding because we know, no matter what happens in this world, God has made us right with Him – not because of what we've done, but because of what His Son has done.

As we close today to go back out into our world at large, may we enjoy the grace and peace that God has lavished on us. May we not be concerned with petty things but be about God's business, the obedience of faith. And may we then share that grace and peace with our friends and neighbors who so desperately need it.