

Romans: Greetings and Gospel

Romans 1:1-7

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The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. Today we begin a teaching series that has intimidated me for years. The book of Romans is the Mount Everest of Bible books. There is no higher peak. There is no harder climb. There is no top-of-the-world view better and more challenging than Romans.

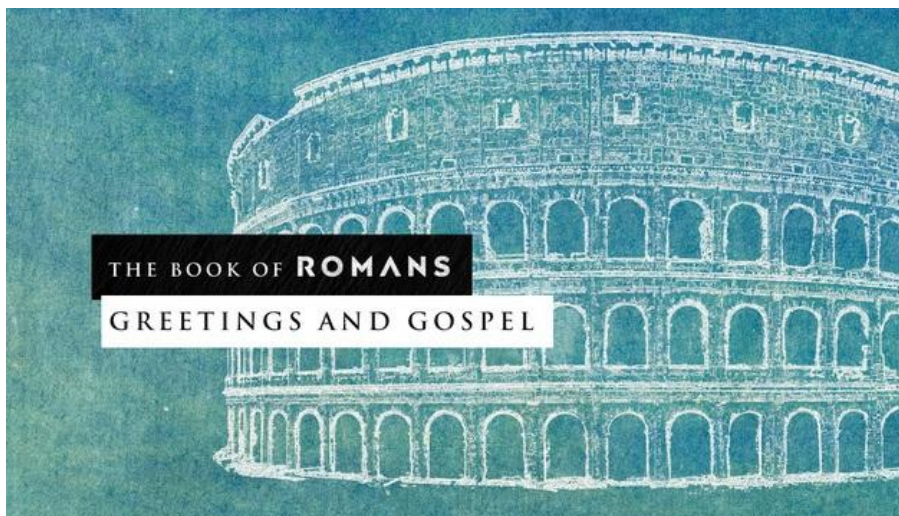
Why? It is the most theologically rich and exegetically intricate book in the Bible. It also is quite long. It is 16 chapters of tightly woven gospel tapestry. This has led other eminent pastors to take the tapestry apart thread by thread. Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones preached Romans for 13 years and his sermons were collected into a commentary set that required 14 volumes. John Piper preached 225 sermons on Romans over the course of around 8 years.

These merely indicate the treasure trove that is the book of Romans. If you could pick just one book of the Bible to have you would be wise to choose either the Gospel of John or Romans.

Our approach is going to be like a family trip to a National Park. We are going to drive every road and every verse. However, some of the trip we will cruise through faster. Some of the trip we will go slower. At times we will stop at a scenic overlook, get out, take selfies, and eat a picnic. We are breaking the series up into five sections.

<i>The Gospel and Our Misery</i>	1:1-3:20
<i>The Gospel is God's Solution</i>	3:21-4:25
<i>The Gospel and our Liberation</i>	5:1-8:39
<i>The Gospel for All People</i>	9:1-11:30
<i>The Gospel-Transformed Life</i>	12:1-16:25

Here is our graphic for the series (below). It will change slightly as we go through the series to indicate where we are.



Our approach to this will be what is known as expositional or expository preaching. I trust you will notice a pattern. We begin with explaining the text in its original context and meaning. We will pay attention to words, flow of thought, and argument and ask, *what did Paul mean when he wrote this? What would it have meant to its original audience?* After establishing that, we will bridge to life today with what is known as application. Expository preaching begins with a firm belief that Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit of God. It is perfect, complete, and authoritative. Therefore, we treat it with seriousness and carefulness to correctly interpret its meaning. Then we seek to apply it to our hearts and every aspect of our lives.

This is likely the only time I will preach through Romans in my life. This is also likely the only thorough series on Romans you are ever going to hear. Let's make the most of it! One inspiring example is two guys in our church are going to memorize the book as we go.

God has used Romans in profound ways. For example, the church's greatest theologian, Augustine, was converted by reading Romans. The Reformation largely began because Martin Luther read Romans 1. John Wesley read Luther's commentary on Romans and was converted. Only heaven will show the full effect this book has had. It is arguably the most influential section of the most influential book in all of human history.

*"[Romans] is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul. It can never be read or pondered too much, and the more it is dealt with the more precious it becomes, and the better it tastes."*¹ (Martin Luther)

*"Man's only righteousness is the mercy of God in Christ, when it is offered by the Gospel and received by faith... if we have gained a true understanding of this Epistle, we have an open door to all the most profound treasures of Scripture."*² (John Calvin)

Romans is worthy of such praise. I hope this preaching series is as well. If I could pick any series I preach in my whole life and ministry to be the best and have God's unique blessing, it's this one.

Back Story to the Letter to the Romans

It is a letter

We call these "books" of the Bible. They actually are a collection of many different types of literature. Gospel, song, narrative. Most of the New Testament "books" are letters written by apostles. Paul wrote 13 of them. They aren't books. We call them epistles, which is just another word for a letter.

Who was the author of the letter? Paul. Who was Paul? Paul was a highly educated Old Testament scholar and religious zealot. He had been a Pharisee which was the highest order in the Jewish religion. He was tasked with eliminating the new religious sect called Christianity. He was violently opposed to any claims to Jesus as Messiah. Then one day on the road to Damascus, Jesus appeared to Paul and commissioned him to be an apostle and

¹ Martin Luther as quoted by Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 25.

² John Calvin as quoted by Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 1.

missionary to the Gentiles. Paul became a Christian. He was a Jewish Old Testament scholar evangelizing Gentiles to the Christian faith. Wild story. But that was Paul.

It was written for a purpose to a people

Paul writes this letter to Roman Christians from the also great city of Corinth in Asia Minor.



He was there for three months as he finished collecting an offering among the Gentile churches for the poor Jewish Christians who were suffering in Jerusalem. He was heading to Jerusalem to deliver the offering, but his eye is on what is next for him. After Jerusalem he wanted to go to Rome.

What is interesting is nobody knows how a church was established in Rome in the first place. Paul had never been there and he was the pioneer Gentile apostle. We do know that on the day of Pentecost there were "visitors from Rome" present. (Acts 2:10 ESV) Is it possible they became Christians and eventually returned to Rome bringing the gospel and church planting with them?

We do know that Paul wanted to go to Rome. His hope was that it would be a base of operations for his eventual goal, which was to take the gospel to Spain. "I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while." (Romans 15:24)

Why is this important? It addresses why Paul would write such a detailed doctrinal accounting of his understanding of the gospel. Paul was introducing himself to the Roman Christians. At that time Paul was controversial, especially among Jewish Christians. Paul wanted to assure them of his credentials as an apostle and the orthodox nature of his teaching. What better way than to write the definitive explanation of the gospel? This would

be like showing you deserve a place on the high school golf team by setting the course record at Pebble Beach in the US Open. Imagine the Christians in Rome reading Romans and asking, "Should we let this Paul fellow preach here? That letter he wrote was pretty good." "Aye, it was."

Greetings and Gospel

"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..." (Romans 1:1-2) You see Paul's name at the beginning of the letter. This was the custom of the day. You began with your name, then the person you were writing to, then gave greetings. Paul expands that basic template and fills it with Christian truth.

"Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus..." The language Paul wrote his original letter in was Greek. Through the series I will occasionally refer to the Greek words behind our English translation. For example, in the original Greek, these seven verses are all one sentence. Things like that. The word "servant" here is another. *Doulos* in the Greek could also be translated "slave." It would have been shocking in first-century Rome. Rome might go down as the most obsessed-with-power city of all time. It makes Washington DC look like a recess playground. Julius Caesar. Beware the Ides of March.

Nobody wanted to be a slave and nobody would call themselves one. But Paul has no qualms describing his life as one of complete devotion and service to Jesus. Are we comfortable calling ourselves a *doulos* of Jesus? Are we living like that?

"...Called to be an apostle." Do you see the balance here? Even apostles are servants/slaves to Christ. Paul doesn't begin with, *maybe you've heard of me and what I have done. I'm kind of a big deal.* He sees himself as no celebrity. True apostles want to be viewed as servants and true spiritual leadership does as well. Roman types are apt to put people on a pedestal, your pastors included. Beware of putting anyone but Christ on any pedestal of your heart. Who are we? We are no apostles and neither are you. At best, we are all slaves. Slaves and servants of Christ.

"Set apart for the gospel of God..." Here is the first use of the word that will dominate the whole letter. *Gospel*. It literally means "good news" or "good news proclaimed." It becomes a word that summarizes the essential saving message about Jesus and his redemptive work AND the ministry of that message through proclamation.

See also that it is the **"gospel of God."** It's not Paul's gospel or a Jewish or Gentile gospel. It is God's gospel. He will say in verse 16 that this gospel is *"the power of God for salvation."* If Romans does anything, it establishes the Christian message in the person and character of God. The world is God's world. Salvation is God's work. The gospel is God's gospel.

"...Which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures..." Paul will expand on this through his letter by quoting the Old Testament and even using Abraham as the prototype for salvation for Jews and Gentiles. Why are the Scriptures "holy"? *"Which he promised."* The "he" is God. The Scriptures are sourced in God first, the writings of the prophets second. This will be developed later in church history as the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture. The Bible is perfect and without error because God spoke it and he is perfect and without error. What did the prophets write about?

"...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..." (Romans 1:3-4)

Awesome verses. It is so concise a statement that many people believe that Paul is quoting a first-century creed which the Roman Christians would have known. What better way to build a bridge than to affirm a statement of orthodoxy?

Let's walk this through. God spoke beforehand through the prophets who wrote Old Testament Scripture concerning God's Son. He's going to name him at the end (verse 6), "*Jesus Christ our Lord.*"

He was descended from David "**according to the flesh.**" The Jews knew that the promised Messiah would be of the lineage of David, even born in the city of David, "*according to the flesh.*" "Flesh" is a really important word in Romans, but Paul uses it in varied ways, which makes it a challenge to interpret.

Here, Paul is using it to describe Jesus' incarnation and earthly ministry. His pedigree is pure Messiah as David's son. His life was fully human. But what happened?

"...And was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead..." What is this? The exaltation of Christ. Jesus' whole ministry is summarized here. It's the overture of the song. Humiliation in the flesh. Exaltation to glory. Incarnation and resurrection. Christmas and Easter. Now you may say, where's the cross and sin? Just keep reading. This is just the greeting, but even here Paul highlights the essence of the gospel. It's not about Paul, it's about Christ.

One little burr here is how Jesus was "*declared*" to be the Son of God by his resurrection. I thought he always was the Son of God. Yes. Paul is explaining something that is often missed in our Christology. By virtue of his obedience to the cross and his resurrection, God the Father bestowed a new authority and power to Jesus that he didn't have before. On earth, he was the Son of God in the flesh. The Son of God in weakness. The Son of God bleeding in the scourging. The Son of God struggling on a Roman cross. All these weaknesses qualified Jesus to be our substitute sacrifice on the cross.

But he is the Son of God in weakness no more. Now he is the Son of God in power. Now he is King of kings and Lord of lords. That's what he told his disciples, "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*" (Matthew 28:18)

This leads us to how Paul refers to Jesus at the end of verse 4, and is repeated essentially in verse 7, "**Jesus Christ, our Lord.**" Why is this critical? Remember who is he writing to—Rome. Who was Lord in Rome? Caesar. The worship of Caesar was required. This was no problem for your average Roman because they believed in a pantheon of gods anyway. Adding the current Caesar to the list was no problem.

Who was Caesar when Paul wrote these Roman Christians? Nero. Nero was a mad man. Nero claimed he was equal to the gods. Nero hated Christians. In just 7 years' time, these same Roman Christians reading this letter would be impaled on poles and lit on fire. In the Colosseum, Roman Christians were thrown before the lions and devoured as entertainment. Paul himself will be beheaded in Rome by Nero.

But wait. Nero was not God's Son. Nero was not prophesied in Holy Scripture. Nero was not resurrected from the dead. Nero was Caesar, but he was not Lord. Jesus Christ is Lord. The Scriptures say it. His life shows it. His resurrection proves it.

Take heart Roman Christians. You are in a city famous in all of world history for its Caesars and senators but there is one who is on a higher throne. The highest throne. He is the Christ of God. Son of David. Son of God. Eternal Savior of all who believe in him. His name is Jesus.

Is our world so different today? Our gods in Western society are not statuary but they are no less worshiped. Is power important? Well, the political world seems ready to explode right now as all sides lust for power. Everyone wants to be Caesar. Is Christianity marginalized today? More and more. Would it seem that the gospel of Jesus is disconnected from anything particularly relevant, powerful, or cool? More and more with each passing day.

My fellow Romans, we must realize the gospel we believe is not my gospel or your gospel, it is God's gospel! The Lord that we serve is not a Caesar or governor or king or president but one who sits on the highest throne and all authority is his.

What is our hope in oppression and injustice? *Jesus Christ is Lord*. What is our comfort in trials and pain? *Jesus Christ is Lord*. What is our help with our struggle with sin? *Jesus Christ is Lord*. What is our courage when tragedies like Parkland, Florida happen? *Jesus Christ is Lord*. It's God's gospel. He's God's Son. He's our Savior. He is Lord of all.

Not a bad way to start a letter, don't you think? Well he concludes this salutation with this:

***"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."* (Romans 1:5-7)**

"For the sake of his name among all the nations." Jews. Greeks. Romans. Gentiles. Jerusalem. Rome. Spain. Indiana. Among all the nations for the sake of his name we proclaim the gospel of God which is that Jesus Christ is Lord of all.

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