



# An Overview of Paul's Letter to the Romans

## (1) Introduction and the Need for the Gospel

Romans 1

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I've decided to do something different for the sermons for the next 8 weeks. We are going to do an overview of the book of Romans – one sermon on every chapter – morning and evening for the next eight weeks. There are 16 chapters in the letter to the Romans. There are different ways to learn. It is useful to go through a biblical subject or book in detail – like we are going with the 10 Commandments. But it is also useful to do an overview of something to get a more general perspective. So, the purpose of this series will be to get an overview of the letter of Paul to the Romans. Studying it this way will enable us to follow the argument of the book as a whole. It will also provide us with a summary of the gospel because Paul's letter to Romans is the most systematic summary of the gospel that we have in the Bible.

As we begin I just want to remind you why we spend so much time studying the Bible. The Westminster Confession of Faith, which summarizes what we and many other churches believe, says that the Bible gives us “the knowledge of God and of his will, which is necessary to salvation.” It goes on to say that God gave the Bible to “preserve and propagate the truth” and to “establish and comfort the church.” That is a pretty good summary of the importance of the Bible. The Bible gives us knowledge of God and of his will. It gives us truth about God and the world. It comforts and strengthens believers. And it gives us what we need to know for salvation.

That is a pretty good summary. And that is why studying and applying the Bible is such a central part of what we do as individual Christians and as a church. To use language from another Reformed confession, the Bible gives us what we need to know live and die happily. The Bible gives us the most important truths for life because it teaches us about God and his will and his plan for the world. It teaches us about our need of salvation from sin and the way of salvation through Jesus Christ. And it teaches us how to live in a way that is pleasing to God and that is most beneficial for us. The Bible is God's communication to us and it is therefore very very precious and time reading it and studying it and applying to our lives is time well spent.

So, we will spend some time with the epistle of Paul to the Romans. It was written by a man named Paul who we read about in the book of Acts which is also in the Bible. Paul started life as a bright Jewish boy who was trained to be a scholar. Originally, he hated Christians and was involved in persecuting them. But then Jesus Christ himself, miraculously appeared to him from heaven, changed his heart and commissioned him to be a missionary to the Gentiles. Soon Paul was travelling throughout the area at the north-eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, preaching the good news about Jesus and planting churches. In the years that followed Paul wrote letters to a number of those churches and some of those letters, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, were included in the Bible. Romans is one of those letters. It is a letter from the apostle Paul to the Christians at Rome sometime around 57 A.D, less than 30 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

A couple of things from the greeting. Paul identifies himself as "a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God." Jesus had called him to be a missionary to spread the gospel. The gospel is the good news about Jesus Christ. The gospel is the most important news that we can hear. It is addressed to sinful human beings who are under the wrath of God because of their sins. This is one of the key facts of human existence. We are sinners. We have broken God's laws. Because of that we are under God's wrath and, apart from salvation, destined to hell. The gospel is the news that there is a way out – there is a way to be forgiven for our sins and made right with God.

That is what the Bible means by salvation. The gospel is that there is salvation through Jesus Christ and what he has done for us.

This is what the epistle to the Romans is about. It is a summary of the gospel. It is a summary of the way of salvation through Jesus Christ. Paul had never met the Christians at Rome before he wrote this letter to them, but as one especially called by Jesus to be an apostle, he was a pastor of all Christians and in this case, he had decided that the Christians at Rome needed to receive a summary of the gospel from him.

One of the implications of this for us is that the gospel continues to be important for us even after we become Christians. It is not that we hear the good news of Jesus, embrace it to become Christians and then move on to other things. The ongoing life of the Christian is closely tied to the good news about forgiveness and renewal in Jesus. We continue to sin, and we continue to need change in our lives and so we continue to need the encouragement and influence of the gospel in our lives. We never outgrow the gospel. The gospel is always central to our lives as Christians because we are always in need of the forgiveness and renewal that God grants to us through the gospel.

In the second paragraph of his letter to the Romans, Paul tells of his desire to make a visit to them. He tells them of his thanksgiving and his prayers for them and he tells them of his longing to visit them. The purpose of such a visit was that both he and they might be encouraged. He wanted to “impart some spiritual gift to strengthen [them]. He told them that he was under obligation to preach and teach the gospel among the Gentiles.

This shows us the importance of church leaders in the Bible and it shows us the importance of Christian fellowship in the Bible. Paul is aware of an obligation placed on him by Jesus to preach the gospel and teach the Christians at Rome, but he is also looked to be encouraged by them. This is an important aspect of biblical Christianity. It is not individualistic. It is not practiced in isolation from other Christians. There are personal aspects, of course, but there are important social aspects. Christians become part of churches where they are taught and where they encourage one another. The Christian life – by definition – is

lived in relationships with other Christians. It is about our primary relationship which is our relationship with God, but it is also about our relationships with other people. Paul reflects that fact by the way he speaks to the Romans in the second paragraph of his letter.

Verses 16 and 17 make some general statements about the gospel. As I've said, the gospel is central to Paul's life and ministry, but also in this letter. So, Paul makes some introductory comments about the gospel. He says that he is not ashamed of it. That is important because the gospel is offensive to people who are not followers of Jesus Christ. The followers of Jesus can expect to be mocked and despised because there are many things about his claims and his teaching and his gospel that are just weird and distasteful to those who have not humbled themselves before Jesus. Jesus did not have the trappings of worldly power and glory. He was a poor peasant preacher and teacher. He was rejected by the religious establishment of his day. He was executed as a criminal. And yet he claimed to be God and he claimed that he was going to judge all men and he claimed that there was no other way of salvation except through him.

If you do not accept that message, it is weird and offensive. There is lots about the message of Jesus that non-Christians find objectionable. And so, followers of Jesus can expect to be maligned and despised and held in contempt. This is why Paul says that he was not ashamed of the gospel. It is tempting to be ashamed of the gospel because association with it will not make you respected by the people of the world.

Following Jesus means following a Lord and a Saviour who was rejected and despised by the world and so it means embracing a life of being rejected and despised by the world. That is why persecution is the norm for Christians. So, one of the aspects of the Christian life is not being ashamed of a gospel that the people of the world find shameful.

But the gospel is good news in spite of that. And Paul goes on to mention a few things about it before he gets to his exposition of it. First, he says that the gospel "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." The gospel is a power. It is a message, but it is a message that has power. It is powerful because it is able to save people.

Now human words can be powerful. The word of a powerful person can get things done. But the gospel is much more powerful because it is a message from God and God's words are powerful in ways that human words can never be. God created all things simply by speaking. Jesus holds the universe in existence by his powerful word. Jesus, by the power of his word, is able to raise the dead to life. It is that kind of power that Paul is referring to when he says that the gospel is the "power of God for salvation." The gospel is a message that comes from God and God is able to actually save people by the power of his word. The gospel can change hearts. The gospel changes people from haters of God to lovers of God. God, the Holy Spirit, uses the gospel to give people new life and he uses it to empower his people to live the Christian life. The gospel is powerful like the word of Christ was powerful when he commanded the dead Lazarus to come out of the grave.

Now the gospel is powerful in two ways. It is powerful to change hearts to love God if that is God's will, but it is also powerful to harden hearts if that is God's will. In Romans 9:18 Paul says that God "has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills." In some cases, the gospel renews hearts to come to Christ. In other cases, the gospel hardens hearts to grow in hatred to God. The gospel always has an affect. That makes it serious business whenever the gospel is preached. That makes it all the more urgent to respond to it in faith and repentance.

Next Paul mentions faith. "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...." Faith is an important idea in connection with the gospel. Faith is an important idea in connection with our relationship with God. Faith is believing the message. Faith is trusting God. Faith is accepting the offer of forgiveness. Faith is the way in which the promises of the gospel are received. Faith is central to receiving the gospel because we are not able to earn salvation by good deeds. Our predicament is such that we are unable and unwilling to change and even if we could change we could never pay the penalty for the sins that we have committed. Faith is the way the gospel is received because we are helpless to do anything other than receive salvation as a gift. Indeed, even faith is a gift, but the gospel calls us to believe.

Faith means admitting that we are helpless to save ourselves. Faith is the opposite of paying our own way through our deeds. Faith is acknowledging that we are spiritually helpless and receiving the gift of salvation that is offered in the gospel. The idea that corresponds to faith is the idea that salvation is a gift. Faith is receiving a promise. Faith is accepting an offer. Faith is entrusting one's eternal destiny to Jesus Christ and resting on what he has done for us. Faith is humbling because it means that we contribute nothing to our salvation. The gospel exalts God and humbles man.

Paul also mentions that the gospel is for the Jew first and also to the Greek. This was a very big deal in the world in which the gospel first came. God had chosen the Jews to be his people. For centuries the Jews were the people of God and the rest were Gentiles. Gentiles could be saved, but they had to become Jews. But the plan of God dictated that after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the gospel should go first to the Jews, but also to the Gentiles. Paul's mission was to bring the gospel especially to the Gentiles. This was an important period of transition and so the relationship of Jews and Gentiles to the gospel is an important subject in the NT including the epistle to the Romans.

In verse 17 Paul writes that "in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed." Now we might wonder why Paul relates the gospel to the righteousness of God. At first glance that is not very interesting. It does not seem relevant to our lives. That is because one of the results of our sinfulness is that God is not very important to us. We care about ourselves and the things that affect our lives directly, but God's importance to us mainly has to do with him giving us things and taking care of us.

We think that way because we are sinners. It is the result of our sinful nature that we care more about our own things and God is not all that interesting to us. But in the world as the Bible describes it to us, God is the most important person and everything about him is very relevant to our lives. In fact, nothing is more relevant to our lives than God is. In the world as it really is, God dominates everything. God created us and everything else his own glory and so true life is about loving and

pleasing God and living with God in the background is a kind of living death. God is what life is all about.

And so, when Paul says that the gospel reveals the righteousness of God he is saying something that is more relevant to you than whatever it is that tends to dominate your thoughts. The world is about God. Real life is about God. The purpose of everything is the glory of God. And so, this idea that the gospel reveals the righteousness of God is supremely important for your life. You must understand that one of the purposes of the Bible is to tell us what is supremely important for our lives, because we are often mistaken about that because of our sinfulness.

So, the gospel reveals the righteousness of God. Now Paul uses this phrase a number of times in the book of Romans and the exact meaning is not always the same. It can refer to the righteousness that comes from God and is given in the gospel. But it can also refer to righteousness as a characteristic of God that is demonstrated by the gospel. And it is the second of these that it means here.

The gospel displays God's righteousness. The gospel reveals God's righteous character. How does it do that? It does it because the gospel is the fulfillment of commitments that God has made through the centuries. From the time of the fall of Adam and Eve, God has made promises and commitments to save his people from their sins. Back in verse 2 of this chapter Paul had referred to the gospel as something which God had "promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son...."

So, the gospel reveals the righteousness of God. It reveals God's faithfulness to his promises. It is a powerful display of God's trustworthiness. The gospel shows that God is true to his word. This is ultimately what is most important about the gospel – it shows us aspects of the glory of God. Remember that everything is about the glory of God. And so that is what the gospel is about as well. And the more we are transformed by the gospel the more precious that will become to us because one of the great results of the power of the gospel in our lives is that it changes us to love God with all our hearts so that his glory becomes our greatest value.

Now from chapter 1:18 all the way to chapter 3:20, Paul writes about the sinfulness of human beings. In a letter that summarizes the gospel, Paul spends a great deal of time writing about our sinfulness. The reason is that the gospel is unintelligible apart from an understanding of the significance and nature of human sinfulness. The gospel is the good news of salvation from sin and its consequences and so a presentation of the gospel must include a discussion of sin. We cannot appreciate our need for the gospel unless we understand that we are sinners before God and the seriousness of that condition.

In the rest of this chapter, verses 18-32 Paul makes the point that all human beings are under the wrath of God. Verse 18 says, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men..." This is the human condition. We are all sinners and because of that we are under the wrath of God. That is a serious predicament. Being under the wrath of God is a terrible thing and if God's wrath is not turned away we will end up in hell. This is the situation that the gospel addresses. This is what salvation is from. It is salvation from sin and its consequences.

The rest of chapter one makes a number of points about sinful human beings. It says that ungodly and unrighteous men suppress the truth. It says that God has revealed himself to all people through the creation, but in our sinfulness, we suppress what we know about God. Many people say that they do not believe in God because they find no evidence that he exists. The Bible says that God has clearly revealed himself through the creation, but we suppress that knowledge in our sinfulness. Paul here makes the point that we are all without excuse.

He goes on to discuss the nature and effects of sin. It involves not honoring God as God. It involves unthankfulness. It involves worshipping the creature rather than the Creator. We were created to worship and honor God. We were created to thank God for all the good things that we enjoy. By nature, we do not do that. We fail to honor God. We fail to thank him. And we worship aspects of the creation instead. That is - we live for something besides God. Something other than God is more important to us than God is. If it is not God, then it is something in the creation.



And the result of that is more sin. Paul, in the last verses of chapter 1, describes the awful and ugly nature of sin. When people worship and serve the creation rather than the Creator, God gives them over to dishonorable passions. Paul mentions homosexuality in this connection. According to the Bible, homosexuality is not a legitimate option for our sexual expression. It is the judgment of God for worshipping the creation rather than the Creator. It is described here as impurity, the dishonoring of their bodies and contrary to nature.

He mentions other sins as well. Envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness, gossip, slander, hatred of God, insolence, haughtiness, boastfulness, invention of evil, disobedience to parents, foolishness, faithfulness heartlessness, ruthlessness. Paul shows something of the terrible nature of sin. It is dishonorable. It is destructive of community and peace. It is perverse. It leads to all manner of misery and brokenness.

This is what the gospel addresses. Sin is the #1 problem in the world and it is the cause of all other problems. It is the source of all misery. Because of it we are under the wrath of God and deserving of hell.

This is what the gospel addresses. This is what we are saved from if we are saved. The gospel is the most important message that we can hear and believing it and responding to it is the most important thing that we can do. Paul was called by Jesus Christ to proclaim that gospel throughout the ancient world of his day. It has come down through time to our day and it is at the heart of the life of the church and of the lives of each believer.

Now Paul felt that the Roman Christians needed to receive a summary of the gospel from him. And by including this letter in the Bible, God decided that this summary of the gospel would be profitable for us as well. The gospel is at the heart of our lives as Christians because it deals with our greatest problem and it is for us the greatest blessing. It is the power of God in our lives. And it reveals the righteousness of God. It is what enables us to live a life worth living. It brings us into fellowship with God. It is the good news that gives us joy and hope and enables us to exult in knowing God and being known and loved by him.

In the first sentence of this chapter Paul says that the gospel concerns God's Son who is Jesus Christ our Saviour and our Lord. The gospel is the good news of what Jesus has done for us. Jesus gave himself to die in our place. Jesus offered himself to be crucified and to suffer the wrath of God against sin so that we might be delivered from it.

Through faith in Jesus Christ our sins are forgiven. On the basis of Jesus' perfect life and sacrificial death, we are made right with God through faith in him and in the promises of the gospel. Jesus suffered so that we do not have to pay the penalty for our sins. Jesus died so that we are delivered from spiritual and eternal death. Through Jesus' death we are reconciled to God and adopted into the family of God. It is as if we had never sinned. It is as if we had always obeyed. "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23)

By means of the power of the gospel we are set free from the power of sin in our lives. Through faith we both died with Christ and rose with him so that his life now empowers us to live the Christian life. We still struggle with sin, but we have learned to hate it so that we no longer live in sin. We are given to see sin for what it is, and we are given to see obedience to God for what it is, and we know something of the blessedness of obedience. All of this comes from Jesus. It is all based on his life, death and resurrection. Jesus gave his life that we might receive forgiveness and life.

We do not contribute to our salvation. We do not add anything to it. It is a gift. Whatever we do that is not sin, is a manifestation of salvation, never the cause of it. It is to the glory of God. It is to the glory of Jesus Christ. It is to the glory of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us. Our joy is to glory in the Lord. This is what the gospel produces. As Paul wrote in Galatians 6:14, "But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ...."

May that be the result of our review of Romans 1. May the gospel work powerfully in us so that we may find our greatest delight in being humble before God and exulting in his great goodness towards us.