

THE STORY OF THE GOSPEL

The letter that changes the world

The most important sentence in the book of Romans is this: “Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us, to the glory of God.”

Romans 15:7 may not top anyone’s list of favorite verses from the book, but this is the sentence, more than any other, that summarizes the effect the author wants his composition to have. Paul, commissioned by the risen Jesus himself, wrote the letter in A.D. 57 to followers of Jesus in the city of Rome. The issue he addressed was the tension in the church between Jews and Gentiles. In the letter he presented his sweeping vision of the gospel in hopes that it would unite the church across racial lines.

The book of Romans comes to us today as a balm that heals division in the church. If the gospel unites Jews and Gentiles, it unites people of all races, all generations, all socio-economic categories, all personalities, all vocations and both genders.

Paul hoped that his letter, and the unity that it fostered, would position the church to support him in his efforts to plant the gospel in Spain. In Paul’s thinking, unity would give the church a missions focus.

In the book of Romans, inward and outward emphases are not mutually exclusive; they’re mutually reinforcing. The church that seeks healing for its wounds should also be the church that looks outward to bring healing to the world. If the gospel is doing its work, the church will know that the balm must be shared.

Paul’s letter to the Romans may be the most influential document ever written. Most notably, it inspired in Martin Luther a fresh view of God and led to the Reformation of the 16th Century, which paved the way for new ways of thinking about the church, government and freedom.

As influential as Romans has been since it was penned almost 2,000 years ago, Paul’s emphasis on unity has not always been appreciated. But once again a fresh wind is blowing the dust off this ancient book, and people are beginning to see it in new ways that seem closer to Paul’s intentions. The letter that changed the world may be changing it again.

The letter comprises four major sections: chapters 1-4, 5-8, 9-11 and 12-16. The first section, Romans 1-4, features the revelation of the righteousness of God, which creates a worldwide family defined by faith.

The story of Romans

If I had one passage of scripture to study for the rest of my life, it would be the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It’s the greatest story I’ve ever heard. It’s impacted my understanding of God more than anything else.

Stories can do that. They can change the way you see the world. How about a letter? I must confess, for all that Romans has done to change the world, I find a letter more difficult to digest than a story, and I find Paul’s letter more difficult to understand

than Jesus' story. Peter, another apostle, grants that Paul can be difficult to understand but nevertheless notes that he writes with wisdom from God (2 Peter 3:15-16).

The more I study Romans, the more I'm convinced that Paul is doing precisely what Jesus did. He's telling a story. He's telling the story of the world as it is fulfilled in the story of Jesus Christ. A narrative lens not only brings the letter into focus, it brings out its vividness.

In his introduction, Paul summarizes the gospel story, marking out a narrative methodology that he will employ in his letter. If we hear the story afresh, even in the introduction to Romans, we will see it overpowering all counterfeit gospels.

Although Paul knows many of the people to whom he is writing, he did not found the church, and he has never been to Rome. So he has some work to do in the first 17 verses to introduce himself and his agenda. The "gospel" ties together Romans 1:1-17, and, indeed, the entire letter. In the introduction, Paul features both the content and the power of the gospel that unites Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome.

Romans 1:1-15:

¹Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ²which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures, ³concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, ⁴who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord, ⁵through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for His name's sake, ⁶among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ; ⁷to 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.

⁸First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world. ⁹For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the preaching of the gospel of His Son, is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you, ¹⁰always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you. ¹¹For I long to see you so that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established; ¹²that is, that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other's faith, both yours and mine. ¹³I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented so far) so that I may obtain some fruit among you also, even as among the rest of the Gentiles. ¹⁴I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. ¹⁵So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

Gospel of God's Son

Paul's introduction features his connection to the gospel and a description of what the gospel concerns. He has been "set apart for the gospel of God," which means that God has called him to preach it.

The gospel, or good news, of God is to be distinguished, in the context of this letter, from the gospel of Rome. Good news in the Roman world concerned the reign of Caesar, the king who ruled the known world. The good news of the Old Testament concerned the reign of God (Isaiah 40:9, 52:7). The New Testament gospel, which God

promised in the Old Testament, declares the reign of God as seen in his Son. The term “Son of God,” both for the Jew and the Roman, conveyed royalty.

The Jews believed that their king, the Messiah, would rule the world (Psalm 2). Paul refers to both the birth and the resurrection of the Son of God. The birth of Jesus, as a descendant of David, the king of Israel, marks him out as the Jewish king (2 Samuel 7:12-13). His resurrection marks him out as the universal and eternal king. He is “Jesus Christ our Lord,” the Jewish king who rules the world.

In the Roman world, Caesar had the power of death. Threats to Roman rule were mercilessly crushed. The subordinate of a Roman Caesar, in fact, put Jesus to death in Jerusalem. The problem, from the standpoint of Roman rule, is that Jesus didn’t stay dead. God marked out the Jewish king, not the Roman king, as his true Son and the world’s true Lord.

Paul leaves out the life and death of Jesus, perhaps because the gospel of Rome particularly featured the birth and enthronement of the Caesars. The birth and resurrection, or enthronement, of Jesus upstages the Roman gospel.

The gospel of God, the good news about the reign of God, is that Jesus Christ is Lord. The gospel of God is also a story about his Son, summarized here in order to feature the birth and resurrection of the Messiah and thereby uphold his lordship. In Romans 1-8, Paul will demonstrate how the story of Jesus brings to a climax the story of the world.

Paul sees himself as an apostle, sent by Jesus, to preach this gospel for the purpose of bringing about the “obedience of faith”—that is, the obedience that consists of faith and the faith that issues forth in ongoing obedience. The announcement that “Jesus is Lord” entails a commandment (Romans 16:26). It is obeyed when one believes it and gives his allegiance to Jesus. In the case of Paul’s readers, they would give their allegiance to Jesus instead of Caesar, or any other so-called lord or god, for that matter.

Paul’s particular mission is to the Gentiles, or non-Jews, and he wants the Roman believers to know that his authority as an apostle extends to them, even though he didn’t plant their church. Therefore, they should receive his letter, and him, in that spirit.

Hoping to visit

Paul expresses his eagerness to visit the Roman believers so that he may impart to them some kind of “spiritual gift” and thereby establish, or strengthen, them. He expects his faith, on his arrival, to encourage them. He expects the gospel itself to strengthen them (Romans 16:25). Therefore, Paul’s letter, which presents both the gospel and his faith, functions as a spiritual gift. The “fruit” that he hopes to see in them is the encouragement resulting from his impartation of the gospel.

Up to this point, Paul’s plans to visit the Romans have been thwarted. Later in the letter he says he has been hindered from coming to them because he aspired to preach the gospel in places where people hadn’t yet heard it so as not to build on someone else’s work. The Romans had already heard the gospel, and their church was not his work. But now Paul is seeing his way clear to visit Rome (Romans 15:20-24).

As an apostle to the Gentiles, Paul sees himself as obliged to all Gentiles: both Greek speakers and non-Greek speakers, and both the wise and the foolish. This further explains why he wants to visit the Roman church, which evidently comprised mostly Gentiles. He expresses a desire to preach the gospel not to Romans in general but to the

Roman believers who are reading this letter. He's not looking to win new converts but to strengthen the believers by imparting his understanding of the gospel.

The gospel of the individual

The gospel of Rome has long since faded from the scene. No one celebrates the birth or enthronement of a Caesar, as they did in the First Century. Other gospels, too, have come and gone. The gospel of God has outlasted them all.

Rival gospels surface in every age and in every place. Each gospel makes an announcement and tells a story. The gospel of our age and place declares that the individual is lord. The story culminates in Western Europe in the 18th Century, when humanity supposedly triumphed in the Enlightenment.

The gospel of the individual is preached to us every day, 24 hours a day, over the airwaves, on the internet, in the workplace, on the campus and in the marketplace. "Don't worry about what God thinks," the preachers of our age tell us. "We determined long ago that if he exists at all, somewhere up in heaven, he doesn't really care about what happens on earth. If he cares at all, don't you think he wants you to have your own way?"

Nineteenth Century British poet William Ernest Henley well represents this sentiment with his widely known lines from "Invictus":

I am the master of my fate:

I am the captain of my soul.

The gospel of God confronts the gospel of the individual, just as it confronted the gospel of Rome.

The gospel story

The story is that a Jewish boy was born some two millennia ago in a village in the Middle East. His birth is worth noting because he was a descendant of David, the greatest Jewish king. The Hebrew Scriptures spoke of a day when a descendant of David, whom the Jews called the Messiah, would rise to rule over, and bring healing to, the whole earth.

As an adult, Jesus acted and spoke as if he believed he were the Messiah. But he seemed to have no aspirations to overthrow Rome, the superpower of the day. He therefore offended the Jews who longed for liberation from Rome. But he also stirred up the crowds, offending the Jews who preferred the status quo. The Jewish leaders had no authority to execute him, but they convinced the Roman rulers that he was a threat. So, as a matter of routine, Rome put him to death. End of story.

Well, not quite. If the story had ended there, there would be no story. Rome crucified Jewish rebels, including would-be messiahs, by the bushel. All of them have faded from the pages of history. A crucified Messiah could not have been the Messiah. Unless ...

Unless he didn't stay dead. And what reason could his followers have had for fabricating the story of his resurrection, or for risking and sacrificing their lives for it?

The triumph of the gospel

If he didn't stay dead, that means the story of the world climaxed not in Western Europe in the 18th Century but in Palestine in the First Century. The shadow of death, which has covered humanity since the beginning, has been turned back. The long night is over, and a new day has dawned. For the gospel of God invites all who believe it to share in his victory over death, to enjoy a new humanity and a new world.

In our day, the resurrection of Jesus means this: He is Lord, and the individual is not. The Jewish king is Lord not only of heaven, where he may seem to reside at a safe distance, but earth as well, where the gospel commands every individual to submit to him.

If an individual insists on his own sovereignty, he might want to consider how well he's running things. If the individual is brought to her knees by either external forces, such as fate, or internal appetites that she can't master, she might want to reconsider her claims. The lords, it seems, can't seem to live without other lords. We can't master one of our days, let alone all our days. And even if we could master all our days, the best we could accumulate is about 100 years' worth. In the end, each individual succumbs to the greatest tyrant of all: death.

Media mogul Ted Turner, one of the most powerful individuals in the world, put it this way: "I'd feel powerful if my kids got straight A's and my wife never got made at me and I never got a case of diarrhea. As it is, power is a bunch of hooley."¹

Modernism's defiant "master of my fate" and "captain of my soul" finds himself cast adrift in a Postmodern search for identity. The no-longer confident individual perpetually asks, "Who am I?" Increasingly, she retreats to the security of her tribe.

The gospel today

In our day, the gospel story, which features the resurrection, seems preposterous. But we cannot imagine that it was any less preposterous in Paul's day. Dead people stayed dead 2,000 years ago, just as they stay dead today.

People believe the gospel today for the same reason they believed it back then: It's true. And it resonates. And it's powerful. And all other gospels turn out, in the end, to be not such good news after all.

One might then ask why the gospel isn't believed. Part of the reason is that most people today conceive of the gospel as being something other than what it is. The focus isn't on Jesus. People outside the church assume that the gospel is about a political agenda. People inside the church assume it's about how people "get saved."

No doubt it has implications for both politics and salvation. But Paul is quite clear: The gospel of God is about God's Son. It's a story about Jesus and how he fulfills the story of humanity. Paul in Romans tells the story of humanity and the story of Israel as redefined by the story of Jesus. The implication of the story of the gospel is the announcement of the gospel: Jesus is Lord.

How does one respond to such a story and such an announcement? With what Paul calls the "obedience of faith." With both initial belief and ongoing obedience. We renounce the gospel of the individual, give our allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ and find our identity in his story, which is the representative human story.

The story is told of a communist lecturer in the former Soviet Union who concluded a message to his audience this way: "Therefore, there is no God; Jesus Christ never existed; there is no such thing as a Holy Spirit. The church is an oppressive

institution, and anyway it's out of date. The future belongs to the State; and the State is in the hands of the Party."

After the party official finished, a priest asked him, "May I say two words?" (In English, it's three words.) The lecturer consented. The priest looked out at the crowd and shouted: "Christ is risen!" The people roared: "He is risen indeed!"²

There you have it: Story, announcement and the obedience of faith. The priest summarized the story with two words that took the form of an announcement. The people responded with words of faith indicating a willingness to obey.

The gospel of God upstages every other gospel, be it the gospel of the state or the gospel of the individual.

New ears

We may need to hear the story again, and to find, quite to our surprise, that we are hearing it in a new way. The gospel, in Paul's view, is a spiritual gift that strengthens those who already believe it.

Paul hadn't yet visited Rome when he wrote the letter that we call Romans. He never made it to Peninsula Bible Church, but his magnificent letter has made it here. Just like the First Century church, we need to hear it—and the gospel that Paul preaches—with new ears.

We may discover togetherness as the people of God that we have not yet known. The gospel that preaches Jesus as Lord unites us like nothing else. This is our story. This is our announcement. This is our Lord. And we may find ourselves newly invigorated for the task of being the people of God "for his name's sake" in this age.

Christ is risen!

Scott Grant / 1-8-06

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¹ Appeared in *Vanity Fair*, quoted by *San Jose Mercury News*, Sept. 19, 1995. P. 3a.

² Quoted by N.T. Wright, *Following Jesus*, © 1994 N.T. Wright, SPCK, London. P. 43.