

# God's powerful Gospel

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Romans chapter 1, verses 1 to 17. 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.

Firstly, I thank God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may know, I may now at last succeed in coming to you.

For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.

[ 1 : 3 1 ] I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you, but thus far have been prevented, in order that I may reap some harvest among you, as well as among the rest of the Gentiles.

I am under obligation, both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish, so I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

For in it, the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith. As it is written, the righteous shall live by faith.

Well, the question I want to put in your mind this morning to get your thinking juices going is a very simple one, and we'll end with it as well. What is God like? What is God like?

[ 2 : 3 5 ] Now, that question is a question that every person asks and answers at some point in their lifetime. Every person.

Of course, some decide, haven't asked the question and answer it by deciding that God doesn't even exist. So, there comes a conclusion, our vast universe, life itself, from the biggest point down to the most detailed experience of our own personal existence, is simply the product of natural forces.

And yet, I found it really interesting that people who decide that often still speak of spiritual experience. When they engage with nature, for instance.

And so, simply deciding God doesn't exist doesn't seem to close out their craving for something spiritual. Most, of course, decide that God is real.

And I think people decide that it's because people need a beating heart, something real, something personal at the center of our universe. And these people, generally, are openly religious people.

[ 3 : 4 9 ] Some, of course, then, there's subdivisions in there. Some are driven by their own sort of warm, fuzzy feelings. And so, they decide that God is like an indulgent grandfather, or a best buddy type figure.

He's the one who always thinks you're special. It doesn't matter what you do. He's the one who will always accept you, and just be happy to hang out with you. No rules, no demands.

Just spoils you, just like that indulgent grandfather. Even though he might be thinking about different things inside. Others are driven by a deep-seated fear.

Fear of death. A fear of standing before God's justice. Fear of being rejected by God. The God they believe in is somewhere out there.

And oftentimes, they decide that God is something akin to a cruel tyrant. Often, these same people are desperate.

[ 4 : 51 ] They please God through their religious actions. And yet, for all their religious actions, they don't seem to be able to discover a sense of peace, or a sense of being accepted, and the joy that that might bring them.

But let's make it more personal. Most in this room, if not all in this room, I'm only excluding the very, very young here, most in this room, that is from toddlers up, are already forming, or have already formed, your view of God.

Then the question becomes, on what basis have you decided your view of God? And with what degree of certainty do you hold your view of God?

Do you have any sense of embarrassment in speaking of God to those you rub shoulders with on a daily basis? Paul declares, he's not ashamed of the gospel.

He's not ashamed of God as displayed in the gospel. Now, I assume, and it is an assumption, but I assume that since Paul leads with that, then it is fairly likely that some Christians in the church at Rome were indeed ashamed of God or ashamed of the gospel.

[ 6 : 27 ] Perhaps that's you too. In some hidden part of your brain, you're not even game to give voice to. Well, friends, I want to say to you this morning that studying Paul's letter to the Christians at Rome, I believe, will radically change your life, whether you're a Christian or not, at this moment.

Why? Why am I so confident in that? Because the letter to the Christians at Rome is all about God's gospel, and God's gospel is all about showing us God, what he's like.

And you can't really discover what God is like without being profoundly impacted and changed by that.

In his introduction, Paul, which we're looking at this morning, the first 17 verses, in his introduction, Paul gives a beautiful summary of what God has done and how it so perfectly suits what we need. everything by nature of the introduction, everything will be dealt with in depth in the subsequent chapters. The intro is just to whet our appetite, as it were, just to make us drool over what's coming when we see something and what God's like, what God has done, what God is doing in our lives, that which we sort of summarize as the gospel of Jesus.

[ 7 : 58 ] And I want to use three headings to unpack it and then come back to a more personal thing. So the first one is that the gospel is God's initiative. Paul's introduction begins and ends with an emphasis on the gospel of God.

Verse 2, the focus is on what God has announced, what God has done for his people. The gospel, in Paul's mind, is entirely God's doing.

Verse 17, as we understand what God has done in his gospel, we also learn heaps about what God is like. The gospel reveals God's righteousness or God's character.

But what does that mean? What does it mean to talk about the righteousness of God? Well, it means lots of things, but in part, it refers to his character. God always does things properly.

God always acts with integrity. He maintains perfect justice, yet manages to show mercy and generosity to his guilty, rebellious people. God, in his righteousness, doesn't fudge or cover over sin.

[ 9 : 10 ] He confronts it and deals with it and the guilt of his people. And in part, God's righteousness refers to his actions. In the gospel, we see God acting.

Acting to do what? acting to deal with the basic dilemma of human life. That is, we are sinful, dirty people and God, being clean and holy, cannot relate to us, will not relate to us in that condition.

So, the righteousness of God is God's action to make dirty, undeserving people clean and acceptable to him. God's action is about God doing for us that which we could never ever do for ourselves.

Meet God's standard of obedience and justice and truth. That's not the most amazing thing, that's amazing as it is. The most amazing thing about that is that it's all available to anybody who wants it through faith.

Verse 17, by faith from first to last. Hard to know exactly what that means but it seems to mean that from the start to the finish, it's just about faith. God has done what he has done.

[10:36] We receive what God has done through faith. And what is faith? Well, faith is taking God at his word. It's not simple.

It's believing what God has said. The gospel of Jesus is God's declaration that in recognizing our need to be rescued or saved from the consequences of our rebellion or sin and simply trusting Jesus to be our righteousness, to be the means by which we will be acceptable to God and loved by God, we find therefore forgiveness and restoration to relationship with God.

In a very real sense, God does all the heavy lifting and then says, it's all yours if only you will believe, if only you will take me at my word that I've done this for you.

Something you can never do for yourself. Friends, the gospel shows us what God is like, but in more detail, the gospel shows us how much God loves his fallen, distorted, grotesque image bearers, grotesque because of sin, how much he wants to relate to them, how much he wants to restore them to be that which he created them to be.

He's announced this way of restoring full relationship to people who deserve only his condemnation. We call it the gospel of Jesus.

[12:14] Second point then is that God's initiative comes with all God's power guaranteeing therefore it will be successful or it is successful.

Paul describes himself as a servant or an apostle, a special messenger of God in other words. We might use more modern terms, a contract worker with a specific task of making known this wonderful initiative from God to anyone and everyone who will listen.

The next cab off the rank for Paul is coming to Rome and then he hopes to get to Spain. Wherever people will listen, wherever Paul can go, he's contracted to speak of this wonderful initiative of God to rescue undeserving people.

But God's gospel is never dependent on Paul or any of the other apostles for success. Look at verse 2. What Paul is speaking, his message, is not a new message. In fact, it's the culmination, it's the final piece of a jigsaw that's been built throughout the whole of the Old Testament.

God's one plan of salvation promised over generations the plan to re-engage with his people in rich, everlasting relationship.

[13:36] And God's power over the generations was seen in keeping his plan on track in spite of all sorts of white-anting of his plan by evil people. God's power was clearly evident.

but never more clearly than in the birth, life, death, and resurrection and return to heaven of Jesus as Lord and Savior.

And we see there in verse 4, Jesus was clearly human, descended from King David. God's promise to David was that a descendant of his would re-establish God's kingdom as an eternal kingdom. And God's power demonstrated in Jesus' resurrection from the dead proved that Jesus was truly God as well as truly human.

And therefore, perfectly qualified Jesus to establish God's eternal kingdom and rule. And so he returns to heaven as Lord and Savior.

[14:43] And verse 5 is that same power which underpins the authority of Paul and other apostles and which in Paul's own generation has resulted in so many people being saved, being changed from the inside out, coming to Jesus for salvation.

And verses 6 through to 12 is very personal details as Paul just reflects on his desire to visit with the Christians at Rome. The fact that there are so many Christians in Rome, the fact that there are any Christians in Rome, confirms the reality of the gospel to Paul.

But very simply, it's just hard to argue with the evidence of radically changed lives. Everywhere Paul goes, he's seen those radically changed lives with people who've been confronted by God's powerful gospel.

gospel. Paul had heard about the changing power of the gospel in the Christians in Rome. Changed from the inside out, changed in their actions, changed in their attitudes, changed in their thinking. And Paul couldn't wait to meet them and swap stories of how they'd experienced God's grace, God's powerful gospel to encourage one another. And so powerful is this gospel.

[16:08] Paul uses a very interesting word in verse 16. He describes it as God's dynamite. The Greek word is *dunamis*, the word we get dynamite from. The gospel is God's blasting powder.

Blasting as dirty, sinful people, as Beck said in the talk, but I won't do all the theatrical things. The old technology of a piece of paper works so well for me.

I don't have to dance and jig around unless my pages blow away. But yeah, the gospel just blasts the dirt away.

Not just on the outside, but on the inside right to the depth of our being. Blasts us free from the guilt and power of sin and leaves us totally renewed from the inside out.

Which in turn allows God to treat me and everyone else who believes like we'd never ever sinned in the first place. Complete restoration of relationship. Complete removal of dirt so that clean now relates again to clean in Christ.

[ 17 : 21 ] Clean in Christ. That's a wonderful picture word, isn't it? One little stick of dynamite doesn't look like very much.

Not that many of us have seen a stick of dynamite, but one little stick of dynamite doesn't look like very much. But boy, oh boy, when it's well applied, it's powerful in what it achieves.

in exactly the same way, my friends. The gospel may not look or sound powerful in comparison to what others in the world says is the way to the good life, the way to security.

But it is the solution for our deepest problems. It is the answer to our deepest cravings.

It demolishes the solid walls of unbelief and resistance to God's rule. No trouble at all. And the third point then is this power of God has a purpose, the unbelievably radical outcome intended in God's powerful gospel.

[ 18 : 41 ] So as best we can say, Paul wrote this letter about 57 AD, which means it's a little over 20 years since Paul himself was confronted by Jesus and the gospel.

He himself, while trying to persecute Christians, was so radically captured and blasted by the gospel, blasted into a whole new orientation in life and contracted to take the message of salvation both to Jews and to every other nation on earth.

20 years on, what's Paul excited about still? The gospel. He's still pushing this radical gospel of God, that salvation, forgiveness, new relationship with God and guaranteed place in heaven is promised to everyone who recognizes their need and simply turns to Jesus for the righteousness that's necessary to get into heaven, a righteousness they can never produce by themselves but is on offer in Jesus.

Jesus. We probably find it a bit hard to understand how radical this would have been in Paul's day. We're so familiar with the terminology that it's just, well I think in some cases, ho-hum for us but this was radical stuff in Paul's day and age.

[ 20 : 07 ] Let me try and illustrate. The Jews for instance, if you ask them what a person needs to get to heaven, they would say, well the first thing they have to do is become a Jew in every shape and form and do all the things that are required of the Jew.

Pray and sacrifice and go to the temple and do this and do that and have your alms days and your holidays and do, do, do. Yeah, that's what, that's, do that for a start and then we'll see. the Romans. The Roman worldview was that they were a superior race. We've heard that in our own sort of 20th century, haven't we? They believed they were the superior race in the world and therefore naturally would be acceptable to the gods.

In fact, the gods would consider an honour to be friends and associated with the Romans and the evidence of that was the physical prowess of the Romans.

The superior intellect, the good character. In fact, that's why the Roman would say that's why we're the rulers of the known earth. Biggest civilization and empire had ever been seen.

[ 21 : 19 ] Again, adoption was a big thing in Roman society. Adoption into a family but only when the adopted person was respectable and commendable and came with a list of great achievements.

So yes, it was a great thing to adopt somebody but they had to be somebody before you would adopt them. God's gospel is so radically different to anything the Romans would have known because God's gospel is big on adopting those who are down and outs, who are dirty, unlovely, undesirable before God.

God's gospel is clear that anyone and everyone regardless of their race, regardless of their circumstance in life will receive a fresh start.

Grace and salvation if they'll receive it as a gift through trusting Jesus. It's that simple. And again, we can feel Paul's excitement at this incredible truth.

If you look at verse 6 there, in the church at Rome, Paul knew there were people from all over the world sitting shoulder to shoulder in unity together recipients of God's righteousness, together loved by God, together assured of his favor.

[ 22 : 56 ] and as a direct result of that, they loved each other. People who naturally would hate and divide each other, they loved each other.

They were committed to helping each other and Paul wanted to be part of it. He soaked it in and just, wow, this is the result of God's powerful gospel. If I put it in modern terms, I think I could say this, that the gospel was doing around the world at that time what the United Nations would long to do, what the United Nations was set up to do and which everybody in the world knows the United Nations will never be able to do.

Now, I'm not saying they haven't done good things. Don't misunderstand. me. But they're just on the surface. The gospel reunites humanity so hopelessly divided by ethnic, religious, and nationalistic boundaries.

And boy, how I wish the gospel would sweep through Europe in the coming weeks before warfare does. So, moving towards conclusion, to the conclusion now, now we're in a position, I think, to understand what Paul's getting at in verse 16 when he says, I'm not ashamed of the gospel.

Because to understand that phrase, we need to understand something of shame and honor. And why Paul says he's not ashamed of the gospel. It's Paul's great thing which the rest of this letter explains in detail.

[ 24 : 37 ] So, shame and honor were huge categories in Roman society as indeed in many Middle Eastern societies still are.

Perhaps some Christians in Rome thought that aspects of Paul's person, Paul's character, or of the gospel itself as a body of truth were shameful.

Now, how might that work for these people? Well, perhaps Paul's background. He was a Jew and a Roman citizen.

Now, lots in Rome really resented dual citizenship, especially when it was a Jew who was a Roman citizen. It was embarrassing. It was actually unpalatable to some.

Then, perhaps, if you add into that the circumstances in which Paul was commissioned to speak the gospel. In Roman circles, to be a rhetorician or a public speaker or a teacher in public places, you needed an illustrious background.

[ 25 : 45 ] When they dig into Paul's background, what did they find? Hmm. He was a bit of a rat pack. He had blood on his hands. And he, according to some sources, he was a bit of a roughneck.

Perhaps he was embarrassing to know that he was coming to Rome. Perhaps some Christians struggled with the apparent shameful beginnings of the gospel.

Well, we understand the gospel and the results of the gospel, but boy, we want to play down the fact that, again, the gospel is sourced in the person Jesus, the Jewish nation, Jewish history.

And my goodness me, we Romans, we're persecuting, we're trying to get rid of the Jews. The suspicious circumstances of Jesus' birth, the ordinariness of Jesus' life, his crucifixion as a criminal, and that was crucifixion under Roman law, remember.

His claim for resurrection, people just don't come back from the dead. Jewish links, indebtedness to the Jewish nation, and so on and so forth. Yeah, you could well imagine that people might be a tad embarrassed slash ashamed of this guy coming to preach the gospel.

[ 27 : 07 ] Sort of, we love the outcome of the gospel, but Paul, can you just tone down the background? Perhaps some Christian, Roman Christians find the gospel itself shameful because it flies in the face of Roman self-value.

It identifies individual Romans as being equally guilty before God. Yes, those wretched barbarians out there that we conquer because we're better, well, actually the gospel says you're not a whit better than them in terms of God.

Equally in need of a rescue because of a bad heart towards God, because of your determination for rebellion and autonomy. perhaps even some people find the gospel or ashamed of the gospel or embarrassed by the gospel because of what it says about God's heart.

See, Romans took their lead from their idea of the gods and the top gods were merciless. The old idea, if you got power, you got wanted.

But this God of the Christians, this God of the gospel, well, for goodness sake, he actually takes the cost of repairing relationship upon himself. He's known and characterized by mercy and kindness.



Amen thank you God bless you God bless you