

(1) A message for the global village

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[0 : 0 0] This morning's reading is Romans chapter 1, verses 1 to 17, and this can be found on page 1131 of the Church Bibles.

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. First, I thank my 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 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 6] I want you to know, 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, for 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.

Thank you very much indeed. Let me add my welcome to you. My name is Simon Dowdy. I'm the vicar here as we begin this series of talks in Romans. So do please keep the Bible open if you've closed it.

And as we begin this series, I want to ask a question. And that is this. If you're honest with yourself, what is the thing that controls your life and your motivation?

[2 : 4 7] The reason why you do things? What's the bottom line, if you like, in your thinking? The thing you live for. The things that shapes your priorities, that governs your decisions.

But I think one of the most revealing things are the letters that people send out with their Christmas cards. Granted, they can be incredibly dull, but so often they really give the game away, don't they?

So whether it's endless travelling, or the agonisingly detailed accounts of the achievements of children and grandchildren, or the latest building project on the house, or career moves, the idols, you might say, of job, of family, leisure, and children.

Well, what is the controlling factor in your life? Because the reason God has given us the letter to the Romans is because he wants our lives to be shaped by the Gospel, by what Jesus Christ has done for us.

He wants our lives individually to be shaped by the Gospel, and he wants our lives as a church to be shaped by the Gospel as well. And not just the Aldersgate talks, but our home churches too, for those of us with churches we're involved in where we live.

[4 : 09] Because I don't know about you, I think if you're here this lunchtime and you would describe yourself as a Christian, I think it's very easy to say, well, I believe the Gospel, but actually for our lives not only to be transformed by it, and not to be shaped by it, and for church life not to be transformed by it, and to be shaped by it, simply to pay lip service to it.

So today as we begin Romans chapter 1, look at verses 1 to 17, there are three things which we need to grasp if our DNA, so to speak, as individuals and as a church is to be the Gospel.

And I put them there on the outline which you were given as you came in. First of all, Jesus Christ is Lord. Verses 1 to 7, Jesus Christ is Lord. Now, Romans was written by the Apostle Paul in around 55 AD, and notice what you write from the start, the focus of the letter is on the Gospel, which simply means the good news about Jesus.

Have a look at verses 1 to 3. Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the Gospel of God, the Gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son.

Now, notice in verse 1 it is God's Gospel, that the message about Jesus Christ is not simply another religion, it's not a man-made system of thinking, it's not a philosophy, it is from God.

[5 : 46] In verse 2, the Gospel notice promised beforehand through the Holy Scriptures. In other words, when we talk about the Gospel, it is not simply Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the four Gospel accounts of Jesus Christ, nor is it even the whole of the New Testament.

Rather, it is the whole of God's purposes in history from the beginning of time as we have them throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament. And notice verse 3, it's the Gospel regarding God's Son, Jesus Christ.

Christianity is at its heart about a person, not an institution, not a moral code, not a system of thought.

And notice it is about Jesus who is Lord of all. You see, just follow through, will you, verses 3 and 4. In verse 3, Jesus, a descendant of the Old Testament King David, but now look at verse 4, and who the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Now, that word declared in verse 4 has the sense of being appointed or crowned. crowned. In other words, at the resurrection of Jesus, when he rose from the dead, never to die again, at that point he was given a new status, crowned, Son of God in power, the one who is now Lord over the whole universe.

[7 : 32] this is what the Apostle Paul says in Acts chapter 13, I put Acts 13, 32 to 33 on the outline as he speaks about the implications of the resurrection.

Just have a look at those verses. We tell you the good news. What God promised to our fathers, he has fulfilled for us their children by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second psalm, you are my son today I have become your father.

Now in Psalm 2, God's son is the figure God appoints to rule the nations, the one who is Lord of all and will be judgeable on the final day.

Similarly, Acts 2, verse 36, the Apostle Peter, speaking of the implications of the resurrection, says, Let all the house of Israel, therefore, know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.

The resurrection of Jesus is like his coronation. He had always been God's son before creation, but at his resurrection, he is now crowned Lord of all for all to see.

[8 : 56] Now I'm conscious maybe some of us here this lunchtime, we have questions about the resurrection, in which case do you please ask me about that afterwards.

But for now I want us to move on and to see what then God's purpose is for his world today. Have a look at verse 5. through him and for his name's sake we receive grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.

Now that phrase, the obedience that comes from faith simply means bowing the knee to Jesus who is Lord. It is surrendering our lives to Jesus because he is Lord.

That is how the Christian life starts, that is how the Christian life goes on. And God's purpose notice is that people from all nations bow the knee to Jesus Christ for his name's sake, for his honour, for his glory.

And of course that is only right to bring honour to him in a universe where Jesus is Lord. Now I wonder if you can see how very, very compelling these opening verses of Romans are.

[10 : 20] What a wonderfully big picture they give us of God's purpose, his purposes for his worlds. Jesus has been crowned Lord of all, which means that all people in every nation should bow the knee to him.

Now there was a wonderful illustration of this on a YouTube video clip that did the rounds just before Christmas. You may well have seen it. It was set in a crowded shopping centre, I think in Sheffield or somewhere like that, with everyone kind of busting around the place doing their Christmas shopping.

A very ordinary place with very ordinary people going about their ordinary lives. And in the middle, in the heart of the shopping centre, there was a kind of cafe where people were just having cups of coffee and that kind of thing before they did yet more Christmas shopping.

And suddenly without any warning at all, one lady got up and started singing the Hallelujah Chorus of Handel's Messiah. She was then joined by someone else.

And then a few moments later, two or three other people. And within the space of about a minute, there was a whole chorus of people standing up, singing brilliantly the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's Messiah, the most brilliant choir singing it together.

[11 : 41] I'll spare you my own version of it, but nonetheless, here are the words they were singing, speaking of Jesus. And he shall reign forever and ever, and he shall reign forever and ever, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Hallelujah.

It's slightly better than that, as you can imagine, in the flesh. But it illustrates what God is saying here. Jesus Christ is Lord of all.

Lord of all. He's not just Lord in the church. He's not just Lord where Christians gather. He is Lord in the public space.

He is Lord in the nitty-gritty of daily life. He is Lord even where people are going about their ordinary lives, doing their Christmas shopping, not paying him any attention at all.

And he is Lord over every nation. He is Lord over all people. That is very counter-cultural, isn't it? Because, of course, many people will say to Christians, well, you can have Jesus Lord in your own private life, in your own private sphere, but we don't want Jesus to be Lord of all, thank you very much, in the public arena, whether it's the world of work or the world of politics or any kind of public debate.

[13 : 15] But no, Jesus Christ is Lord of all, God's Son in power. So let me ask, is that the controlling reality of your life?

That is the question we started with this lunchtime, that Jesus Christ is Lord of all. Is that the controlling reality of your life? At work, as you go about your work, as you interact with others, as you consider what is important, or at home, as you think about how you spend your time, the things you're committed to and focused on, or your children and what you want for them, is the controlling reality that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Is that the thing that gives shape and meaning and purpose to everything else and shapes every single priority and decision?

That's the first thing, Jesus Christ is Lord of all. Secondly, therefore, be eager to take the gospel to all.

Have a look, will you, at verses 8 to 10. first, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world.

[14 : 43] God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times. And I pray that now at last, by God's will, the way may be open for me to come to you.

Now, you can imagine, can't you, the terrific encouragement it must have been to Christians across the Roman Empire to hear that there were people in Rome, in the centre of the empire, who have bowed the knee to Jesus, who is Lord.

No wonder their faith is being proclaimed in all the world. And now, verse 10, Paul wants to visit them. And the surprise in this next section is that even though they are Christian believers, Paul still wants to bring the gospel, the message of Jesus, to them.

You see, have a look at verse 13. You can see in verse 13 he is speaking about a harvest among the Gentiles, by which I take it Paul is saying that when he comes to Rome, he is longing that people who have not yet bowed the knee to Jesus will do so.

But he also wants to bring the gospel to the church in Rome, verse 11, to strengthen them. Verse 12, to encourage them. Verse 15, he wants to preach the gospel to them.

[16 : 02] In other words, those who are Christians who have bowed the knee to Jesus need to hear the gospel just as much as those who aren't. So I may I say that if you're here this lunchtime and you're just kind of looking in, as it were, on the Christian faith, this is a really important series of talks for you to come to because you will hear the message of Jesus Christ, what is at the heart of the Christian faith, and there is no more important message to hear.

So please, if you haven't yet done so, mark out the next few Tuesday lunchtimes in your diary. But for those of us who are Christians, we need to do the same.

We too need to hear the gospel. You see, there isn't one message the gospel for those who have not yet bowed the knee to Jesus, and then another message which those who have bowed the knee to Jesus need to go on and hear.

Now, it is the same gospel that will strengthen us as Christians. I put Romans 16 verse 25 on the outline where at the end of the letter, the Apostle Paul says, now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel.

If we put our trust in Jesus, it's the gospel that will strengthen us. Perhaps when we're feeling weak and ineffective in the Christian life, it's the gospel that will strengthen us.

[17 : 28] When we're feeling the challenge of being a Christian, perhaps at work, finding it hard going, it's the gospel that will strengthen us. When we're facing opposition, it's the gospel that will strengthen us.

Or perhaps you're here this lunchtime and you're a fairly new Christian, it's the gospel that will strengthen you. Perhaps you're here and you're wanting to live a more radical, a visionary life for Christ.

It is the gospel that will strengthen us to do that. Not something beyond the gospel, but the gospel itself. Now, one of the ways in which Romans will strengthen us is in our commitment to proclaiming the message of Jesus to others.

I put Romans 15, 22 to 29 there on the outline. Don't look it up now, but do look it up later. Where we see that Paul's hope is that these Christians in Rome will get right behind him as Paul moves from Rome in his travels to Spain.

He wants to go to Spain not for the sun, but to proclaim the message of Jesus Christ there too. And his longing is that the church in Rome will get right behind him. See, do you notice even here in chapter 1, Paul's speaking, verse 14, of being bound.

[18 : 53] Verse 15, of being eager. Verse 16, being unashamed. You see, let me ask, are you a box ticker?

Yes, I believe the gospel. I believe the gospel is from God. I believe it's about Jesus. I believe he's now Lord. I believe everyone needs to hear the gospel. Yes, I can tick that box. Are you simply a box ticker?

Or are you someone who is eager for the gospel, unashamed of the gospel? Now, you and I are not apostles, as the apostle Paul was.

But nonetheless, God's purpose for us as we look at this letter, as a church and as individuals, is that we'll be eager to proclaim the gospel and take it to others.

because the message of Jesus is a message for our global village. Jesus is Lord of everyone. And therefore, of course, if this series in Romans simply leaves us thinking, well, I now understand Romans better, or I now understand the gospel better, then I have failed.

[20 : 06] I was reminded just a couple of weeks ago of an incident that Don Cormack writes about in his best-selling book Killing Fields, Living Fields. about the spread of the gospel in Cambodia, and I guess one or two of us may have read it.

In the mid-1970s, many Cambodian Christians were living in refugee camps in Thailand. One was a 14-year-old called Chen. He was terminally ill with stomach cancer, and he had been given about three months to live.

Nonetheless, he was determined that his village should hear the claims of Jesus Christ. And so, armed with portions of gospels and tracts, he went home, despite his illness, despite bandits, and despite mines.

And this is what the author writes about him. One can hardly imagine the amazement of those Cambodian villages when this pathetic boy, leaning on two crutches, stood before them, holding out gospel tracts.

most of them would have given all they had to have been in the place he had just left. A secure refugee camp complete with food and medicines and possible sponsorship to America.

[21 : 30] I am bound. I am eager. I am not ashamed. ashamed. Is that our burden?

To proclaim the message of Jesus at work, at home, wherever we find ourselves, and to facilitate that to all people across the world.

I don't know about you, I think it's very easy to say we are in theory, to pay lip service to it, but in practice it is much, much harder.

It is a costly thing to do. It's costly as a church. It means that churches need to be much more focused on outsiders rather than simply doing things the way we feel comfortable with and it's costly as individuals.

Jesus Christ is Lord, Lord of all. Therefore be eager to take the gospel to all. Thirdly, because the gospel is how God rescues people.

[22 : 36] Have a look at verses 16 and 17. I'm not ashamed of the gospel because it's the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written, the righteous will live by faith.

Now, in a sense, these verses are very much a summary of the whole letter, so we're going to keep coming back to them over the next few weeks. But notice while you hear that the Apostle Paul is not some superhero who has not felt the temptation to be ashamed of the gospel.

No, he knows that temptation just as we do. Perhaps for some of us it's that we fear it isn't really true, that we fear we're not really able to speak with any sense of conviction.

Perhaps others, we worry it's not really relevant. Or maybe we don't have confidence that the gospel message is powerful. Well, notice Paul is resolved to be unashamed of the gospel.

[23 : 43] He will proclaim it. Why? Well, because verse 16, this is how God saves people. When Paul's talking about salvation, he means being saved on the final judgment day.

And it is to save all kinds of people, first the Jew, then for everyone else, the Gentile. Why do you have confidence that it's powerful to save?

Because, verse 17, in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed. It is through the message of Jesus Christ, dying in our place, that we can be certain of being right with God on the final judgment day.

And it is by faith, it is a gift, like every gift, it is something that has to be received and believed. It's always a great news story, isn't it, when someone is acquitted in a courtroom case.

Perhaps you see them on the television screen, they're going into court, and you can tell just by looking at their faces, the strain, the pressure they are under, what is at stake in the courtroom.

[25 : 01] But then they're acquitted, declared not guilty. And you see them they're standing on the pavement afterwards, and their whole demeanour has totally been transformed.

Now can you imagine in your mind's eye hearing that verdict on the final judgment day. Right with God, no punishment to pay, acquitted.

And the glorious truth is that if we believe the gospel, the message of Jesus, if we've bowed the knee to Jesus, then on that final day God will declare us right with him.

God will be so let me finish with two final applications. First of all, for those who have bowed the knee to Jesus, may I say that our danger and my danger is that we will lose sight of the gospel.

Sadly, throughout history there have been Christian organisations and churches that have moved away from the gospel. They start off by being thoroughly committed to the gospel, they then begin to assume the gospel and take it for granted while other things apart from the gospel increasingly dominate their agenda and then finally they lose the gospel altogether as those other things take over.

[26 : 32] In other words, as we look at Romans over these next few weeks, we need to ask ourselves the question, is the gospel I believe the real gospel? Is the gospel I believe the real gospel?

Some of us may discover we've moved away from the gospel. All of us, I take it, will have our understanding of the gospel challenged in some way. And not just do I believe it, but am I being shaped by it?

Am I being transformed by the gospel? And for those of us who are not yet trusting in Jesus, Romans will show you why it is that Christians talk about the need to be saved.

I wonder if you thought that was an odd thing in verse 16 or perhaps a rather offensive thing in verse 16. You may be offended by what these verses say, verses 16 and 17, that it's only by trusting in Jesus alone that we can be right with God.

In our culture, that is a very, very hard thing to hear, isn't it? And so next week, beginning right with the very next verse, Paul will show us why it is that it is only those who trust in Jesus who will be right with God on the final judgment day.

[27 : 58] So do come back next week. But for now, let's pray together. for in the gospel, a righteousness from God is revealed.

Heavenly Father, we praise you again that Jesus Christ is Lord, that he is Lord of all, that he is the Lord of the whole of his creation. Thank you for this wonderful news that it is possible to be right with you on the final day.

And we pray that these wouldn't simply be things that we hear with our ears, but that would shape us in our hearts and minds and lives. And we ask it for Jesus' sake.

Amen.