

Lesson 1: Paul's Greeting to the Romans

Romans 1:1-7

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

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Introduction to Interpreting Romans

In high school my pastor decided to lead our Sunday School through Paul's letter to the Romans. I remember sitting in chairs set around in a circle with my pastor expounding from Romans. I also remember that I did not understand a single word he said. To be fair, my mind was quite muddled at the time. I did not have a clear grasp of the gospel. After that I left Romans alone for about 8 years. Towards the end of college, I remember debating with my brother Charlie about whether or not Paul in Romans 7 is speaking from the perspective of a non-Christian or a Christian. I do not remember which side I took. I do remember thinking afterwards that to understand chapter 7, I need to understand the flow of the argument in chapter 6 and in chapter 8. But then I began to realize to understand chapter 6 and 8, I needed to know the flow of 5 and 9. And on and on to the whole letter.

That led me to doing my own inductive Bible study of Romans over the next couple of years. I determined to observe the argument of Romans from beginning to end, and to not look at any commentaries until after I had made my own observations, comments and questions. I did not figure Romans out after that first in-depth study. That's not generally how Bible study goes. You have to leave it alone and come back again several times.

I did become convinced that Paul's argument in Romans is a powerful, logical presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ worth knowing forwards and backwards. So, I have come back again to Romans over the past 30 years to be strengthened in my understanding of the gospel.

I eventually made it to the commentaries to check my observations and to be discipled scholars who have spent much time and effort in Romans. The commentary that spoke to me most was Douglas Moo's from the New International Commentary series. I give him credit for challenging me and helping me to put more pieces together.

I would not encourage you to start with the commentaries. Nor to depend on a teaching series like this one. Make your own observations. Take up your Bible and get a notebook and pen or laptop and word file and start observing. Observe the whole, how the whole letter is organized into major divisions and observe the parts, how Paul's thought flows from one paragraph to the next. Write down what strikes you as important or interesting or strange. And write down the questions that come to mind. Wrestle with the Bible yourself. That's not just an intellectual exercise. It's a spiritual exercise where you bring your heart and mind to God's word and trust him to work on you and speak to you.

Do you want the gospel of Jesus Christ to transform how you think and how you live? Then get to know Paul's letter to the Romans. This series is intended as an aid to you as we observe the word together.

Let's get started.

The Nature of a Letter

The Letter of Paul to the Romans. What makes a letter a letter we might ask? What do you think? What is required for a piece of writing to be designated a letter? A letter is a message written from somebody to somebody. Or from multiple people to other multiple people. Some of the New Testament letters might be written in the form of letters without having been sent to one specific person or group. Maybe that is true of Hebrews and James. But for Paul, when Paul writes letters he is usually writing with a person or church in mind to whom he sends the letter. Which means there is always some kind of context. This is not abstract Christian truth. This is truth at work. Truth in life. Truth from a seasoned pastor and missionary to a group of people living, working, raising families in the major urban center of an empire.

The Greeting of the letter gives a chance at the beginning to ask who are these people and why was this letter written?

On the highest level, the structure of Paul's letter is simple. The first half of chapter 1 is introduction. The last half of chapter 15 along with chapter 16 are conclusion and everything in between is the body of the letter. The body of the letter contains two parts, beginning with theology or right thinking in chapters 1-11 and ending with ethics or right practice in 12-15. From orthodoxy to orthopraxy or from gospel truth to gospel transformation. Paul first expounds the true content of the gospel then exhorts us to transformed living of the gospel.

We will consider the letter's structure with a little more detail when we come to the thesis in verses 16-17.

We have this basic structure of intro, body and conclusion. We are going to spend three lessons in the introduction. For the introduction Paul uses a standard Greek letter introduction of greeting, blessing, thanksgiving and prayer. As a skilled writer Paul takes the standard form and makes it his own. For the sake of our study, we will divide the introduction into three parts, in this our first lesson we will consider the greeting and blessing, where we will primarily ask, who are these people? Next time we will focus on the thanksgiving and prayer in verses 8-15, asking, why did Paul write this letter? In the lesson after that we will look closely at the thesis of the letter in 16 and 17.

So, who are these people?

Let's read the text and as we do notice that we have who the letter is from, who it is to and the standard blessing at the end. [Read Romans 1:1-7.]

The basic gist of that is that we have a letter from Paul and it is to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints. With this final blessing. Grace to and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. But in the from section Paul packs in a ton of phrases that we are going to need to unpack, but they are not all about him. It is about the content of his gospel.

1. From Paul

The first three phrases establish Paul's ethos or credibility with the Romans. He has not been to Rome, so who is he to be writing the Romans.

a. A bond-servant of Christ Jesus

First, he is a bond-servant of Jesus Christ. The implication is that Paul does not act on his own account. He is a servant who has a master. He is acting at the call of his master.

b. An apostle

Second, his master has called him to serve in the role of apostle. An apostle is one who has been sent out. The term could apply generally for messengers of the gospel, evangelists or missionaries who go out in Jesus' name, proclaiming the good news.

However, the term seems to have taken on a specific, technical meaning very early in the life of the church when the remaining disciples sought a replacement for Judas in Acts 1, they set requirements that the new apostle should be one of the disciples who walked with Jesus during his earthly ministry and a witness to the resurrection of Jesus.

Paul seems to understand that he is filling a special role, though somehow lacking in the requirements, when he says of himself in 1 Corinthians 15:7-10, "he appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as it were to one untimely born, he appeared to me also. For I am the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God, I am what I am."

Paul is a servant who has been sent out as an apostle, a messenger. And a messenger needs a message.

c. Set apart for the gospel of God

So, third, Paul sees himself as set apart for the gospel of God. The gospel of God is his message.

In verses 2-4 Paul takes a little detour to introduce his gospel message, which God "promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures."

Paul is letting us know here that this good news is not religious innovation. It's not Paul's idea. The gospel Paul has been commissioned to proclaim comes from God, being announced ahead of time in the Old Testament. There is a lot of new about the new covenant. Paul will be clear about that. There is discontinuity. To understand the mission and structure of the gospel wholly on the pattern of the Old Testament would be pouring new wine into an old wineskin. It will not hold. That's the wrong way to do the gospel. There is newness in the new covenant. Perhaps, because there is such significant newness, Paul continues this concern through the letter to show that his message is not only discontinuous with the Old Testament, but also continuous with the Old Testament. There is both continuity and discontinuity. His message flows out of the Law and the Prophets, while unashamedly bringing about significant change in Jesus Christ.

For this is the gospel of the son! That's the point of verse 3. Promised by God, concerning his son.

And notice who this son is. Two things. He is human. He is of the flesh. Truly human. And not just any human. He was born as the rightful heir to the throne of David. That is why we call him Christ. Christ means Messiah, anointed one, the King! He is the king foretold.

Even more, he is divine, the son of God! He was declared so with power when he was raised from the dead. John told us what Jesus said before he died, "No one has taken my life away from me, but I lay it down on my own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again (John 10:17-18)." Who says that but God? And we do not have to get into was it the Father that raised Jesus, was it Jesus that raised Jesus, was it the Spirit that raised Jesus. Yes! Do not have time to get into the Trinity right now. But here is a basic claim of Christianity. Power over death shows off the true nature of Jesus Christ. He is both God and man.

Through his ministry, Paul's message has been Christ-centered. Luke gives a glimpse into Paul's preaching in Acts 17:2-3. Having arrived in Thessalonica, Paul begins his ministry in the synagogue. Luke writes, "And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.'"

Though Paul's gospel message is always Christ-centered, Paul is not going to argue in Romans that Jesus is the Christ, that he had to die and raise again and that he is both God and man. Paul assumes these truths. This is all we are going to get on these truths. Just 2 verses in the greeting. Since Paul is able to assume these truths, I believe that he assumes the Romans agree with these truths. He is being clear about his understanding of who Jesus is. At the same time, he builds common ground with his audience. If they wonder what Paul's gospel is all about, they can rest assured it is all about Jesus Christ who is man, Messiah and God.

The letter of Romans is not going to be about the who of the gospel, but the how of the gospel. For the who of the gospel, we could go to John and do a study on the nature of Jesus and the nature of faith in Jesus. That was John's concern in writing his gospel. In Romans, Paul assumes agreement on the who and moves on to argue the how. How is it that faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ brings about God's righteous plan of salvation? But that is skipping ahead of ourselves to the thesis.

d. Apostle to the Gentiles

In verse 5 we get a fourth bit of information about Paul the apostle. Paul understands that he has been given a special gift or grace from Jesus to be an apostle to the Gentiles. This agrees with what Jesus told Ananias at Paul's conversion, "he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel (Acts 9:15)." It also agrees with Paul's missionary work over the last ten years in Asia Minor, Macedonia and Greece (also see Galatians 1:7-10).

In describing his special ministry to Gentiles, Paul uses here the curious phrase "obedience of faith." This is his goal in taking the gospel to the Gentiles. For the sake of the name of Jesus, he endeavors to bring about the obedience of faith. The phrase in English keeps some of the ambiguity of the original Greek. We can narrow the meaning down to two possibilities. Either faith itself is the obedience or faith is the source of the obedience. If faith is the obedience, then the phrase would mean that Paul is seeking to bring about among the Gentiles the obedient act of faith. His goal is belief in Jesus. If faith is the source of obedience, then Paul's desire is to bring about life change among Gentiles which flows out of faith in Jesus. Obedience of faith is, then, that obedience which comes from having believed in Jesus.

I lean toward the second. I think Paul understands saving faith as the beginning of a transformed life. In 6:17 Paul is going to give thanks to God that the Romans "have become obedient from the heart."

It is an obedience of faith accomplished by a new internal reality brought about by the gospel, a new way of seeing and living out the will of God.

It is the circumcision of the heart promised by Moses in Deuteronomy 30:6; one of the new realities of the new covenant. But we will have to wait until we get into the body of letter to consider more deeply how Paul envisions this obedience of faith working out in the lives of Gentiles.

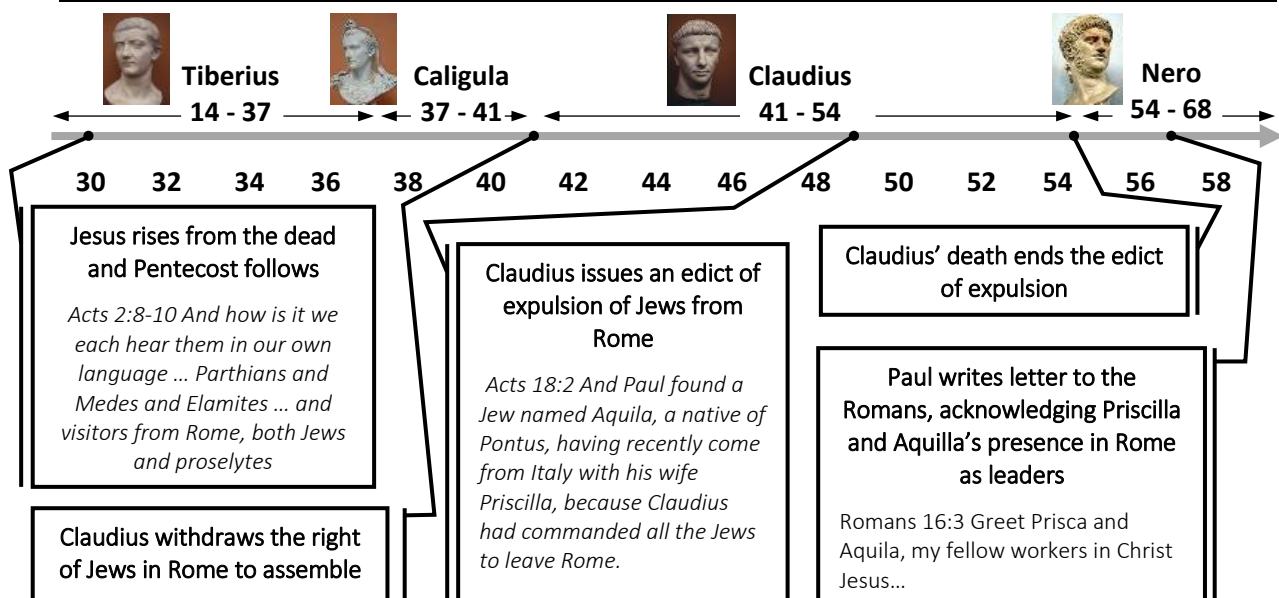
Moving to verse 6, Paul addresses his audience for the first time, "among whom", that is among the Gentiles, "you also are the called of Jesus Christ."

Paul's last word about himself as apostle to the Gentiles is also his first word about the Romans.

2. To the beloved of God in Rome

Paul primarily addresses the Romans as Gentiles. And yet, there is quite a bit of Jewish reference in Romans. Paul's literary antagonist in chapters 2, 3, 6, 7, 9, 10 and 11 is certainly Jewish. Paul refers often to the Old Testament. The discussion about issues of conscience in chapter 14 addresses disagreements stemming out of old covenant practices. And several of those greeted in chapter 16 have Jewish names. How should we understand the make up of this church.

Here are some important considerations.



Acts 1:10 mentions specifically that Jews from Rome were present at Pentecost when thousands believed the message of Jesus. We might assume that in the months to come some returned to Rome and the early Christian movement began in the synagogue.

In AD 41, at the beginning of his reign, emperor Claudius removed the right of assembly from Jews. If they had not already been doing so, this may have pushed forward the practice of the Roman Christians to meet in homes.

Eight years later Claudius expelled Jews from Rome. Luke mentions this edict of expulsion in Acts 18:2 as the reason Priscilla and Aquila left Rome. Presumably the edict was relaxed when Nero replaced Claudius as emperor in 54 AD. By the time of Paul's writing around 57 AD Priscilla and Aquila are back in Rome as house church leaders.

It is possible that during the five-year expulsion of Jews from Rome, Gentile believers stepped into roles of leadership and the Christian movement continued to grow, though more Gentile in terms of both members and culture. This does not mean there are no Jews present among the Roman recipients of the letter. As evidenced by Paul's comments to several fellow Jews in chapter 16, some Jewish leaders were able to enter back into positions of service and leadership. And yet, Paul is able to characterize the whole movement as Gentile. Addressing the Romans as you who are among the Gentiles. And in verse 13 when he can say, "I want to obtain fruit among you, even as among the rest of the Gentiles."

What we have in Rome then is a community that began with Jews and still includes Jews and at the same time is primarily Gentile with a mix of Gentile and Jewish leadership. So what? Why does it matter? A basic principle of biblical interpretation is that the author is communicating to an audience. The meaning of the text is the meaning that the original author, inspired by God, intended for the original audience. Understanding the audience to whom Paul wrote and understanding the circumstances of the writing, can help us at times to interpret the meaning of the text.

For example, in chapter 2:17, Paul writes, "But if you bear the name 'Jew', and rely upon the Law, and boast in God...you who teach another, do you not teach yourself?" This is a strong, negative challenge to those who bear the name Jew. When he makes that challenge is he addressing all the members of the church in Rome. No. His Christian audience is primarily Gentile. Who then is he addressing? Is he calling out Jewish members of the church? That's not likely either, since he is affirming of the Roman believers throughout the letter, both Jew and Gentile. We can conclude, with this reference and others, that Paul has set up a literary antagonist based on real antagonism he has

experience from his own people who oppose the gospel of Jesus Christ. We will see that through the letter. Knowing the audience helps us to understand what Paul is doing here.

Knowing the audience will help us with other challenges to interpretation. There is a tension in the letter between acknowledging the Jewish source of the gospel and allowing the gospel to be free from Jewish religious and cultural practices. Paul remains aware that he is writing a community that is born out of Judaism and that has both Gentile and Jewish believers. That awareness, we presume, will affect how he communicates the gospel and how he exhorts the Romans to live out the gospel. As we go through the letter, interpreting the letter, we keep in mind, “What does this mean or what could this mean for the original audience?” And we know a little bit about them. For interpretation, the audience matters.

One more assumption we see Paul make about his audience is that they are Christians. That’s in verse 7. They are “the beloved of God” and “called as saints.” For Paul, saint is not a term for an especially holy believer, but a term for any true believer. A saint is one who has been made holy by God and set apart for special service. For Paul, this is true of every believer.

3. Blessing

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. This is Paul’s typical blessing. He usually asks for grace and peace, and he usually refers to both God the Father and Jesus Christ. These could be platitudes. Stock phrases that a good Christian minister sticks on to the end of a greeting.

But I believe that we know this is not the case with Paul. He really wants God’s grace to be on you. He really wants you to experience peace with God. And he believes deeply in God the Father and in our Lord Jesus Christ to bring about these blessings in your life.

Reflection questions

Whether you use these questions individually or with a group, be willing to spend time on questions 1 and 2 considering your own observations. For a group discussion, go around in a circle and encourage everyone to share a personal observation or two.

1. What stands out to you as important or interesting or helpful when you consider this teaching on Romans 1:1-7 or when you consider your own observation of Romans 1:1-7?
2. What stands out to you as confusing or questionable? What is left unclear or what questions would you like answered?
3. What stands out to you in Paul’s description of the gospel of God in verses 2-4? What does Paul’s emphasis suggest to you about our understanding or proclamation of the gospel today? What application might you take away from these verses?
4. How do you personally identify with Paul’s phrase “obedience of faith”? If the phrase means the act of obedience is faith, how have you experienced that idea in your life? If the phrase means obedience that comes out of your faith in Jesus,
5. Consider how Paul described himself as a bond-servant (servant or slave) and how he described the Romans as beloved of God. How are different areas of your life affected when you remind yourself that you are a servant of God? How about when you remind yourself that you are beloved of God?