

Romans Summary
Week 1, Wednesday September 7, 2016
Introduction and Romans 1:1-17

Introduction

It is fairly uncontested that Paul wrote his letter to the Roman churches from the middle to the late 50's AD, from Corinth or vicinity, while he was planning his return to Jerusalem, then to Spain by way of Rome. This expedition seems to be the ultimate reason why he writes to the Romans; that is, because of his trip to Spain. In the same way he has used Antioch as his 'home base' for his missionary journeys to date, so he desires to have Rome as his home base as he moves into this new region with the gospel.

However, if they are going to be his home base then he needs to ensure they are on the same page with what his gospel is, particularly the logic for his gospel being for, "the Jew first and also the Greek." It seems with the expulsion of the Jews from Rome under Claudius and their subsequent return under Nero that there has been some Jew/Gentile tension in the church. There may even, perhaps, be an anti-Jewish sentiment which would bring Paul's mission into question.

So, Paul is setting out his gospel for them to demonstrate how his gospel, God's gospel, is revealing God's covenant faithfulness. On the one hand, through Jesus, the Messiah, God has fulfilled his promises to Israel. On the other hand, how through Jesus, who is Lord, God has rescued the whole world. In short, Paul's gospel truly is for both Jew and Gentile equally.

Our contemporary challenge of reading this letter has the normal distance from the original readers, as well as language, symbols, stories, and assumptions. However, more significant is that we are children of the Reformation. We tend to read Romans through the lens of Martin Luther's question, "How can I find a merciful and gracious God?" This has transformed our reading of Romans into a manual of doctrines with the human subject at the centre and our salvation being the main focus. With that reading much of Romans can seem unimportant and often gets shoved aside.

We need then to read Romans anew allowing Paul to set his agenda, which seems to be the righteousness of God and to be open to asking Paul's questions and answers as the appropriate ones — even when it is not immediately clear how they can benefit us. In short, we need to delay our gratification to hear Paul speak clearly and wholly.

Romans 1:1-17

Paul begins his letter in the traditional way by declaring who he is that is writing. The two most significant features of his identity is that he is a slave and an apostle. Paul has given up his life and rights to serve Jesus Christ and Jesus has set him apart as a slave for the preaching of his gospel. This is not just any gospel (good news) this is God's gospel, the promised good news (see Isaiah 40) which Israel has long been waiting for.

The content of his good news concerns God's son (Israel language) who is born in the line of David—definitely messianic. How is it that an apparently failed Jew from the region of Galilee could be considered the Messiah by anyone? Because God has raised that person from the dead. The thing that God has promised to do for Israel and the rest of the world at the end of the age, he has, surprisingly, done for Jesus in the middle of the age. This resurrection

demonstrates that Jesus is who he said he is—Messiah—and he has done what he says he came to do—fulfill God’s promises.

It is this Jesus, who is the Messiah and the now exalted Lord, who has given Paul this commission of apostleship with the purpose of bringing the obedience of faith among all Gentiles. This is short hand which means to bring Gentiles into covenantal faith with the God of Israel.

Paul then shifts his attention from who he is to who he is addressing; the churches in Rome. He is using exaggerated speech, but he is earnest when he says their faith in Jesus is known and that is cause for him to give thanks to God regularly for it. More, he is being diplomatic when he assures them that he has desired for some time to visit them. He did not found these churches, so he is being more careful than usual in the way he speaks to them.

At the same time, he does, indeed, desire to visit them for two reasons. First, he wants to share in their ministry. Paul loves what he does and he wants to do it there too. He would like to preach in Rome and experience new Gentiles coming to faith in God. Second, he wants to impart a gift to them, namely, the gift of fellowship and sharing of faith for mutual encouragement.

Paul is aware of where he is wanting to go to preach though. If his message is, “Jesus is Lord,” and it is, then declaring that in the capital city where there is already a Lord (Caesar), then Paul is engaged in risky behaviour. However, in light of that he can assert he is not ashamed of his gospel—he will not back away from it for either Jew, Gentile, or fear of rejection, imprisonment or death.

The reason he is not ashamed, ultimately, is because this gospel is itself the power of God for salvation. Paul, time and time again has witnessed that when he preaches his gospel about Jesus people come to faith. There is a power inherent to the gospel declaration which overcomes the powers within and without people that would otherwise keep them from believing and pledging their allegiance to Jesus.

The reason for this power in the gospel is that it is itself a revelation about God. God’s righteousness is revealed when the gospel is proclaimed. Which means that when Paul preaches his gospel about Jesus people (Jew and Gentile) can see that God has been faithful to his covenant promises to rescue Israel and to establish his rule over all the people of the earth. God’s faithfulness is responded to by human faithfulness; from faith to faith.

Paul finishes with a quote from Habakkuk 2:4, “the righteous shall live by faith.” No matter who’s faith is being referenced, for Habakkuk the question is what is God doing allowing a pagan nation to attack his people? In short, is God righteous (keeps his promises)? In answer the prophet is given a vision for the future and in the meantime is told that God’s true people will practice trust in God (faith). In the same way, Paul’s gospel will reveal how God has been faithful to his promises through Jesus, but it will require his people to put their trust in God to see it. This is not simple a one off quote however, Habakkuk and this question forms the backdrop for the first 4 chapters of the letter, so needs to be kept in mind as we read.

Not Ashamed of the Gospel

Our first sermon for week one is, "Not Ashamed of the Gospel" (pg. 15-23). Below are our reflection and discussion questions:

1. Rutledge says that we are ashamed by the gospel because it insists that we are weak and we don't want to be. What are some examples from your life of wanting a 'self-help' religion instead of the gospel?
2. This sermon is from 2006, so is not 10 years old, which means her examples of human need are 10 years old. What are some current examples of the human need of a saviour?
3. Rutledge gives an example of a 13 year old Amish girl who demonstrates Christ living in her. Who are your examples of Christ living in us?
4. How can we practice our faith so that we are not ashamed of the gospel?