

Romans: The Good News of God

A Man Called Paul

Romans 1:1a

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Scripture

Throughout the ages God has used outstanding men and women to accomplish his purposes in the world. Today we are going to study one of those individuals, the apostle Paul. We will notice that God used Paul's remarkable gifts and abilities for his own purposes. And we will consider what that means with respect to our own gifts and abilities. Let's read Romans 1:1:

¹ **Paul**, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God. (Romans 1:1)

Introduction

When you and I write a letter, we generally use a format that includes the date, name and address of the recipient, salutation, greeting, main body, conclusion, and finally our signature.

In the first-century world, they also had a letter-writing format. Typically, it first included the name of the sender, then the name of the recipient. This was followed by a greeting, main body, and conclusion. Sometimes the greeting was inserted between the name of the sender and the name of the recipient. The "envelope" of the letter consisted of the name of the sender, the greeting, and the name of the recipient.

The apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Romans in the conventional first-century way: sender, greetings, recipient, main body, and conclusion.

The "envelope" of Paul's letter to the Romans is the first seven verses of Romans 1, and is an integral part of his letter. What is interesting about Paul's "envelope" is that it has theological content at every point.

Lesson

But before we even get in to the “envelope” of Paul’s letter to the Romans, I want us to learn something about the author of the letter to the Romans, a man called Paul. Paul, the author of the letter to the Romans, was a remarkable man, and he was used by God in a remarkable way.

So, briefly, what do the Scriptures teach us about Paul?

I. Paul’s Background

First, notice Paul’s background.

Paul was a rigid, fanatical, nationalistic Jew. He hated the Lord Jesus Christ and everything connected with him, and regarded him as a blasphemer.

As a young man, Paul, then known as Saul, tried to destroy the Christian Church. In Jerusalem he went from house to house, dragged off men and women and put them in prison (Acts 2:3). Still “breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples,” he obtained permission from the high priest to go to Damascus in order to exterminate the fledgling church there (Acts 9:1-2).

On the road to Damascus Paul encountered the risen Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 9:3-6), and he was converted to Christ. His life was totally transformed, and he became the mighty defender of the Christian faith and apostle to the Gentiles.

Now let’s take a closer look at this because we cannot but be impressed by the marvelous way in which God prepared this particular man for his particular task. What else do we know about Paul?

Paul was endowed with unusual and exceptional natural gifts and abilities. There is no question about that. It is something that comes out everywhere in all of his letters, and also in what we are told about him in the book of Acts. Paul was undoubtedly one of the great minds, not only of the Church, but also, of the world. This is something that is acknowledged even by non-Christians.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones says that towards the end of World War II a series of lectures was given in London on the “The Master Minds of the Ages.” It was a secular society that arranged the lectures, but in the list of master minds was the apostle Paul, because they had to admit that he was one of the master minds of the ages.

Paul’s great mind is something that comes out very clearly in everything he does. You cannot help noticing his tremendous reasoning power, his logic, his arguments, the way in which he marshals his evidence and facts, and then presents them. He was a most amazing man if you look at him from a natural stand-point and consider the incredible natural gifts and abilities which he had.

But in addition to that, notice his birth, his upbringing and his training. Notice how God was preparing Paul for the great task to which he had appointed him.

A. *As a Jew*

First and foremost, Paul was a Jew.

He has told us all about that—“circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews” (Philippians 3:5), and so on.

Yes, but not only that; he was also trained as a Pharisee. Paul had the privilege of sitting at the feet of Gamaliel, the greatest teacher among the Pharisees. And there, under that superior teaching, he himself became an expert on Jewish law, at least is it was taught and interpreted by the Pharisees (Philippians 3:5b). Paul tells us that he excelled above all others. He obviously came out as the top student in all his classes, earning the equivalent of *two* Ph.D. degrees. He was a Pharisee of the Pharisees, an expert in the Jewish understanding and interpretation of the law of God.

B. *As a Roman Citizen*

But although Paul was a Jew, he was also born a Roman citizen.

Do you remember how in the book of Acts, when he had to make his defense after being arrested in Jerusalem, he pointed out that he was “born a citizen” of Rome (Acts 22:28)?

Being a Roman citizen in those days was a big deal. It was a high honor to be a Roman citizen. Many privileges accompanied Roman citizenship, and on more than one occasion Paul used his Roman citizenship to facilitate his work as an evangelist and church planter.

Another thing that is important in this regard is that Paul happened to be born and raised in Tarsus of Cilicia (Acts 21:39). Now, Tarsus was one of the three main centers of Greek culture. The other two were, of course, Athens (in Greece) and Alexandria (in Egypt).

And as you read Acts you discover that the apostle Paul had been well-trained in Greek culture. He knew the Greek poets and he could quote them. He understood Greek philosophy and logic, and was able to debate the most able Greek minds of that day.

Paul had this amazing background of Greek culture at its best, in addition to his Roman citizenship.

II. God’s Purpose

Now, why am I spending so much time on all of this? For this reason: Paul’s letter to the Romans will show us that this mighty man of God was raised up by God to fulfill God’s purpose in two special ways.

A. Paul Was to Defend the Gospel against the Jews

First, Paul was to defend the gospel against the Jews.

Paul deals with this in almost every one of his letters. He, of all men, was the man whom God had raised up to defend the gospel against the Jews and Judaism.

He tells us that he even had to stand up to the apostle Peter (Galatians 2:14-21). Peter was beginning to go astray on the issue

of the gospel and Judaism. He was afraid of the Jews, and so he began compromising the gospel a little here and a little there. And who can tell what might have happened to the Christian church were it not that the apostle Paul was able to stand up and confront the apostle Peter, and to win him back again to a true understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

There is no question that the apostle Paul's knowledge of Judaism, which he had gained in his home and also in his upbringing and training at the feet of Gamaliel, was of inestimable value. He knew the position of Judaism better than its proponents knew it themselves. And so, as a Christian, he was able to deal with it and show its fallacies and finally refute it.

Let me put it another way. The difficulty with many honest and sincere people at that time was this—how were they to reconcile the teaching of the Old Testament Scriptures with this new teaching, with this new gospel, with this new faith. The charge which the Jews especially brought against the gospel was that it was something false, that it was not from God at all, that it was a complete contradiction of everything that was taught in the Old Testament, that it was an innovation, and therefore they warned people against it.

One of the great tasks of the apostle Paul, therefore, was the reconciliation of the teaching of the Old Testament with that of what became the New Testament.

After his conversion, Paul went into Arabia for several years. There he undoubtedly spent his time meditating on this very thing. He was enlightened by the Holy Spirit. He went right through the Old Testament Scriptures that he knew so well. And he found Christ in them everywhere, so that when he came to write these letters to various people and churches, he could produce quotations, he could use them at the right point, he knew the Jewish case inside out because of his upbringing and his background.

It was all of inestimable value to him in his defense of the gospel against the Jews and Judaism.

B. Paul Was to Proclaim the Gospel to the Gentiles

But God's second purpose for Paul was to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles.

Paul was called to be the apostle to the Gentiles. He tells us this in Romans 15:16. And it is obvious that Paul's Roman citizenship was of priceless value to him in his ministry to the Gentiles. Furthermore, his knowledge of Greek culture was extremely valuable to him in his ministry.

Here was a man who not only had a gospel to preach but really understood the people to whom he was preaching, whether Jew or Gentile.

Take the way he expressed the matter in writing to Corinthians where he said, "I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I become like one under the law. . . so as to win those not having the law" (1 Corinthians 9:19-20).

Paul could speak as a Jew. *And* he could speak as a Gentile. He knew both cultures. And so he knew how to present the gospel to both, and to preach the gospel to all people.

Indeed, he tells us in Romans 1:14-15: "I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome."

This is one of the amazing things that one sees when contemplating the marvelous way in which God brings his purposes to pass—how he had been preparing the apostle Paul for all the great things that he had for him to do.

III. Principles for Today

But here we come to very important principles, which are of real practical value to ourselves.

Let me ask you a question. What is the relationship between the Holy Spirit and his work, on the one hand, and natural gifts and

abilities and background, on the other? This question sometimes leads to confusion.

There are some who say that nothing matters at all except that a person be converted and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. That, they say, is *all* that is necessary, and natural gifts do not matter at all. If a person is filled with the Spirit, then nothing else matters; the Spirit is all-powerful. Surely all this emphasis on Paul being a Jew, they say, knowing something about Greek culture, possessing Roman citizenship, has got nothing to do with it. Nothing matters except that a person is born again and converted, and that he has the Holy Spirit at work within him.

I know of a Missions Agency which seems to adopt this position. They say that education, training, background, culture, etc. really count for little; what really counts is that you are a Christian filled with the Spirit of God.

Now let me say that there are certain things in Paul's writing that seem to lend a certain amount of credence to this idea. For example, in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul points out with magnificent eloquence that "God chose the foolish things of this world to shame the wise" (1 Corinthians 1:27). Later in his second letter to the Corinthians he says that "the weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world" (2 Corinthians 10:4). They are spiritual weapons.

So, on the basis of texts like these, some argue that it does not matter what a person's natural gifts are. It does not matter whether a person is learned or ignorant—nothing matters except the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now, how does one respond to this? If you are observant, you will notice that in some arenas it seems to be regarded almost as a qualification that a person should not possess natural ability in connection with the things of the gospel, that he or she should not have great natural abilities, that he or she should not have too much understanding and knowledge and training. Have you noticed this? I have, and it is becoming increasingly prevalent, I fear, in subtle ways in our Christian community.

This view, however, is inconsistent with the Scripture, and let me show you why I say that.

Read through the Bible and notice the people whom God used in an outstanding manner. And you will find in every case they were remarkable individuals, individuals of outstanding natural ability whom God had prepared in a most unusual manner.

Look at Moses, for instance, with his natural ability. He acquired training in the palace of Pharaoh, and notice how God used that in his preparation for his ministry.

Look at David. Read his Psalms. What a remarkable person he was!

Look at Isaiah. Read his writing. He was an extraordinarily gifted poet and writer.

In the New Testament you see the same thing. The apostle Peter, though not formally trained academically, was nevertheless an outstanding leader, pastor, and writer in the first-century church.

Not only do you find this in the Bible, you find it in Church history too throughout the centuries. Last time I mentioned Augustine of Hippo, Martin Luther and John Wesley. I could also mention John Calvin, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and countless others—people of outstanding ability that, in a natural sense, were unusually gifted. And, frankly, that is the norm.

These are the people whom God seems to have used most remarkably in bringing his great purposes to pass in extending the kingdom and in taking the church forward.

There are, then, certain principles which we can deduce from this. Let me mention just two for you.

A. *There Is Nothing Wrong with Natural Gifts*

First, there is nothing wrong with natural gifts.

It is God who endows all men and women with their natural gifts; we do not create our own gifts. We exercise and develop them, but we do not create them. As David the Psalmist says of God, “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in

my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well" (Psalm 139:13-14).

Shakespeare did not create his own ability. Mozart did not create his own ability. Einstein did not create his own ability.

All gifts are given by God because he is the Sovereign Creator. Therefore it is unscriptural and wrong to belittle and disparage natural gifts. The Christian faith puts no premium on ignorance or on stupidity. There is no advantage in the Christian life to fall into that category.

B. Do Not Glory in Natural Gifts

But let me go further. In the second place, do not glory in natural gifts.

That is what the apostle Paul was concerned about when writing to the Corinthians. The trouble with the Corinthian Christians was not that they had gifts, but that they were boasting of them and glorying in them. That is something that is denounced everywhere in Scripture.

There is nothing wrong in natural gifts and abilities themselves, but if I glory in them, or think that because I have them I do not need the Holy Spirit, then I am wrong.

Natural gifts and abilities are not done away with or set aside by the Holy Spirit when a person becomes a Christian. What the Holy Spirit does is control them and use them.

That is how we are able to understand the way in which God has used the men and women mentioned in Scripture. Notice how each one of them has his or her own style. If somebody read to you a portion of the writing of Isaiah, you would recognize it, would you not? You would be able to say, "That is Isaiah."

And if somebody read a portion of the writing of Paul, nobody, who has any knowledge of the Scriptures, would suggest that it is from Peter or John. No! Every one of these men had his own style—they do not all read alike—they are not mechanical.

The Holy Spirit did not dictate to them what they had to say. What the Holy Spirit did was to take each of these men with all their natural gifts and powers and abilities, and use and employ them in the writing of the Scriptures.

It was God who gave them these gifts. And it was God who saw to it that Paul was born in Tarsus. It was God who saw to it that Paul was born a Jew. It was God who saw to it that Paul was a Roman citizen. It was God's way of preparing him. He had a task for Paul. And so you see the glory of God shining through in all of this. The very man at the right moment for the particular task!

Look at it in the life of Martin Luther. Luther was the man used by God to bring about the Protestant Reformation. He was trained as a monk in the Roman Catholic Church, and he knew all about the Roman Catholic Church from the inside. And God took all of his learning and background and used him at exactly the right time to bring about his purposes in the sixteenth century.

Such are the people God uses. Ordinarily, he does not take a man, who knows nothing about anything, then fill him with the Holy Spirit and use him. No! He prepares his man, and he has continued to do so through the centuries.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, there is a personal lesson in this for you and me.

If you are a Christian, you used your gifts and abilities in your old life. Now God wants to use them in your new life. You used your gifts and abilities in your studies, in your vocation, in your recreation, even in your sin. Those same gifts can now be used in your Christian life for the glory of God.

That is the lesson we find here in the life of the apostle Paul.

We all have natural gifts and abilities. Let us use the gifts and abilities that God has given us for his service and for his glory. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Our Father, forgive us when we glory and boast in our own abilities, not realizing that it is a gift from you.

Thank you for the gifts and abilities that you have given to each one of us. Help us to understand that these gifts and abilities have been given to us by you in order to be used for your glory. You have equipped each one of us in such a way that we are to use those gifts in your service.

And all of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.