

Sermons through

Romans

According to the Flesh – According to the Spirit

Romans 1:3-4

With Study Questions

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Romans 1:3-4

Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called *to be* an apostle, separated to the gospel of God ² which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, ³ concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, ⁴ and declared *to be* the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:1-4).

Introduction

When we speak of the Christian faith, are we speaking of something material or spiritual? There are those who think it is biblically virtuous to extinguish any material aspect of their faith in Christ. This can be done to the extent that their faith may not touch their physical lives at all; there is a compartment in their make-up as a human being called 'religion.' That compartment is for church and Jesus. When they die that compartment, like an insurance policy, will become highly valuable – but until then it stays put with the occasional uncomfortable answer they must give those who ask that they are, in fact, a Christian.

Variations of Christianity, from the time of Christ (at least), such as Gnosticism and Docetism have sought to downplay things that extend into time and space – concrete things. In short, according to this emphasis, material is bad, spiritual is good. Not to overstate or understate the issue, but remnants of this continue to this day in those who consider themselves Christians but see no connection between their faith in Christ and the way they conduct their lives – whether with their neighbors, church (whether they attend at all), politics or even their own families. All those things have different compartments.

The flipside of this error are those who view their Christian faith through purely empirical eyes – as something that works. Individuals come to church or seek after God with a need or a hurt and they've heard that Jesus will help them. Struggling people, marriages, families, communities and nations will be straightened out, so-to-speak, if they get in lockstep with Jesus and His laws. Whole-hearted efforts are made (at

least it seems) at living in this world the way we should and we wait for the good times to come. We give our faith two terms in office – that should suffice! Some see results, some don't. Some persevere, some don't. They leave the faith; leave the church with the sentiment, "It didn't really work for me."

There is clearly a flesh/spirit distinction we see on the pages of Scripture. One needn't be much of a student, if at all, to acknowledge that the world consists of things material and immaterial – fleshly/carnal and spiritual. What do we make of this distinction? How far along were you in your Christian faith before you realized you'd spend eternity, not as a mere spirit-being, but in a physical body? How many of us understand Paul's writings in such a way that we think all we need to do is rid ourselves of our physical cages in order to know the fullness of joy? A view more Platonic than Christian.

Here, very early in Paul's letter to those in Rome, he will begin to speak of Jesus according to the flesh and according to the spirit.

Review

In quick review we see Paul a Bondservant – no longer a slave of sin leading to death but a slave of Christ leading to eternal life. Paul had the office of apostle – an office that is not perennial, that does not extend beyond those specific individuals, chosen by Jesus who were witnesses of the resurrected Christ.

Paul was set apart for the gospel of God promised in the Scriptures – even the Old Testament Scriptures – reminding us that the foundation upon which we trust our souls and build our lives is found not in the cloudy instruments of human sentiment but in the defined message God has graciously deposited in His word – a message from the beginning of history – a message **"concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord,"** Christ meaning *Messiah* and Jesus meaning *Savior*.

...who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, ⁴ and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:3b-4).

According to the Flesh – The Seed of David

Clearly the reference to Jesus being the “**seed of David**” is to His physical or fleshly descent or lineage (Matthew 1:1, 6). It is not as if the birth of the Messiah would be random – that the Christ could have been born to any person at any time. In the same way the birth of Moses brought the ire of those in power, the birth of Christ had specific promises attached to it (a particular lineage or genealogy – Genesis 49:10; Matthew 1:1-16; Luke 3:23-38) bringing similar horror to the generation of children by which His birth was surrounded (Matthew 1 and 2). Jesus didn’t become King through political maneuvering. He was born King (Matthew 2:2).

Paul will bring up David, along with Abraham in chapter 4. But here he mentions only David. I don’t think it’s a stretch to suggest that Paul mentions David here, rather than Abraham because of the images it will drum up in the minds of those conversant with the Old Testament Scriptures to which Paul had just alluded. There are distinctions between Abraham and David.

Abraham was the father of the faithful (Galatians 3:9). Paul will use Abraham as a model of one who “**believed**” and it was “**accounted for righteousness**” (Romans 4:5; Galatians 3:6); Abraham’s example being one of the intense sacrifice of offering his only son (Hebrews 11:17). Although we certainly wouldn’t say that David lacked faith, one would be more inclined to view David as a conqueror and a conquering king – first over “**lions and bears**” then over the powerful enemy of God’s people, Goliath (1 Samuel 17) and finally leading the nation of Israel to the apex of its strength.

The promise attached to the Messiah was that He would sit on David’s throne. We read of that promise made to Dave:

..that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, ³¹ he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ(Acts 2:30-31).

There is attached to the Messiah, a promise of untold victory. According to the Old Testament the conquest associated with the efforts of the Christ would be universal:

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you. ²⁸ For kingship belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations (Psalm 22:27, 28).

The One who would sit on the throne of David would not only be the Omni-benevolent (all good) One, He would be the One to whom all rulers must bow:

Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. ¹¹ Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. ¹² Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him (Psalm 2:10-12).

All rulers – all nations are to be “**under God**” perhaps more particularly “**under Christ.**” Often times it isn’t until the smiling politicians begin to function like Nero that we long for leadership that would acknowledge the authority of an all-wise, all-powerful, all-present, all-good God.

At the writing of this letter, it was the ruthless madman Nero who governed – a despot with no inclination whatsoever of bowing to anyone but his own mirror. Jesus, in a certain sense, had come and gone, yet there remained Nero – using the followers of Christ as torches in his gardens and whose deaths at the jaws of beasts would provide entertainment in his vast stadiums.

Was there not a promise of deliverance by the Messiah? After the feeding of the five thousand we see the followers of Jesus seeking to force, as it were, His royal hand:

When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!” ¹⁵ Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself (John 6:14, 15).

One must wonder what was on the mind of the mother James and John when she made the request of that her two sons sit on His right and left hand in His kingdom:

Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" They said to him, "We are able." ²³ He said to them, "You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father" (Matthew 20:22-23).

It appears as if they thought Jesus would provide the immediate overthrow of Rome. The cup they would drink be the cup of sacrifice—like Paul being poured out as a sort of **"drink offering"** (Philippians 2:17). Was there not an expectation, at some level, of the political overthrow of Rome by those in Jerusalem during His so-called **"Triumphal Entry?"** (John 12:12, 13)? Even at His ascensions Jesus seems to be clarifying the nature of His redemptive mission.

Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ And He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. ⁸ But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:6-8).

In the epistle we are currently studying the question will come up more than once—**"What advantage has the Jew"** (Romans 3:1; 11:1)? Where is the deliverance of Israel? There is, according to Paul, something to be said regarding the Israelite **"according to the flesh"** which we'll get when we reach those passages.

But with the fullness of the promises associated with David (or at least the One who would sit on David's throne) in mind, Paul will now inform us who the One born of the seed of David was declared to be **"according to the Spirit"** that his readers might realize that the heart of the

faith is to those who belong to God according to **“the promise” (Roman 9:8)** according to the **“spirit” (Romans 8:13)**.

In all of this we should not think Paul is teaching one to the exclusion of the other as much as it is a clarification of one as it relates to the other. In short, we should not think the promises associated with the Messiah were merely ethereal or spiritual any more than we should think Jesus was not truly human – made of flesh blood. Jesus was truly born a descendant of David – a human descendant with all the attributes of humanity, **“yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15; Roman 8:3)**.

But as Peter pointed out and Luke recorded, Jesus’ taking of the throne of David was not accomplished through the immediate political overthrow the Roman Empire; or any other empire for that matter. It was at His resurrection (which also included His ascension) where He was **“exalted to the right hand of God” (Acts 2:29-33)**. Paul brings our attention here to the same event.

...and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:4).

According to the Spirit – The Son of God

Jesus was born of the seed of David – in the flesh, the body of Jesus came into being (Hebrews 10:5); but Jesus never came into being as the Son of God – He was declared to be the Son of God – not a statement of His birth but a designation of His divine person (the eternal Son of God). We may not initial view **“Son of God”¹** as a very explosive term; but it did carry with it divine implications. One example recorded by John:

This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God (John 5:18).

¹ **12.15 υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ**: (a title applied to Jesus, literally ‘son of God’; parallel in semantic structure to phrases consisting of υἱὸς followed by the genitive of class or kind; compare 9.4) one who has the essential characteristics and nature of God—‘Son of God.’ εἰ υἱὸς εἶ τοῦ θεοῦ, βάλε σεαυτὸν κάτω ‘if you are the Son of God, throw yourself down on the ground’ Mt 4:6.¹

In chapter nine Paul will again use the phrase “**according to the flesh**” which will again be followed by a reference to Christ’s other nature, divine nature. Paul writes of Israel...

“...from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God. Amen (Romans 9:5).

We must keep in mind that a dead Messiah, in the minds of many followers, is a Messiah who simply did not succeed in His appointed task. But a resurrected, living Messiah, who is Himself God, has not merely succeeded, He has conquered. And those who trust in Him, through Him are to see themselves as “**more than conquerors**” (Romans 8:37) even against the backdrop of being “**killed all day long...sheep...to be slaughtered**” (Romans 8:36).

Those who view merely the outward promises associated with the Messiah (whether it’s a good marriage or a good government) miss the primary target in the Messiah’s mission – that target being sin and death.

For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:2-4).

Jesus didn’t merely triumph over the symptoms; His victory was over that darkness from which all the symptoms and attending sorrows come – sin and death. As a man Jesus was the fitting sacrifice and as God He had the divine power. As Calvin taught:

His divinity possesses power, righteousness, life, which by his humanity are conveyed to us. ²

² Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: Romans* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 1:3). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

In His resurrection we see the acme of power and authority. Jesus, the God-man did not sink under death—even a death that contained the infinite wrath of God’s justice (Isaiah 53:5, 6).

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father (John 10:17, 18).

In his letter to Corinth, Paul will again make the flesh-spirit distinction when he compares Adam to Jesus.

And so it is written, “*The first man Adam became a living being.*” The last Adam became a life-giving spirit (1 Corinthians 15:45).

I think it is a mistake to relegate all of the blessings and benefits of the Christian faith to the immaterial realm. But we also must recognize that front and center, the Christian faith is to be heralded with our eyes toward what Jesus did **“according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection of the dead.”** Information, by the way, conveyed to us by the Spirit (Romans 8:16).

Not readily apparent in the English is that the word **“dead”** *nekron* is plural. Jesus, raised from the dead is **“the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep (died)”** (1 Corinthians 15:20).

Let us conclude with one more comparison:

For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive (1 Corinthians 15:21, 22).

Let us not lose the clear implications of such a message, ever acknowledging (as we so clearly see in the world around us) that in Adam all die—that we might cling to Christ—holding firm to the faith (1 Timothy 1:19) that in Christ we be made alive.

Questions for Study

1. Is the Christian faith to be thought of in spiritual or material terms? Explain your answer (pages 2, 3)?
2. Give a quick review of the opening words of Paul (pages 3, 4)?
3. Could Jesus have been born to any person at any time? Explain why or why not (page 4)?
4. Why do you think Paul mentions David rather than Abraham or some other Old Testament saint (page 4)?
5. Discuss the various promises associated with the Messiah? How do you think people may have misunderstood this (pages 4-6)?
6. Was Jesus truly human? Why do you suppose this is important (page 7)?
7. When did Jesus take the throne of David (page 7)?
8. Jesus was “born” of David but “declared” to be the Son of God. What is the difference (page 7)?
9. Why would people seek to kill Jesus because He God’s Son (pages 7, 8)?
10. How could Jesus have appeared to fail as Messiah? How has He in fact succeeded? What does that mean to you as a Christian (pages 8, 9)?