

Blank slide

Let me add my welcome to the one you have already received. The beginning of classes at our local colleges is always a time of excitement at the new students in town and the new events that come with them, mixed with a nostalgia for the abundance of parking spaces and the uncrowded streets we used to have. For those of you who are here for the first time, a special welcome and a reminder that there will be an informal welcome with refreshments in Room 102 immediately after the service. My name, by the way, is David Kingston, and I serve as one of the elders of BCF as well as a tormentor-sorry, I mean teacher-of organic chemistry students at one of the local colleges.

I imagine that many of you have been watching the Olympic Games from Rio this past week, and have been thrilled at the way the Jamaican runner Usain Bolt seemed effortlessly to win three gold medals

Slide (Bolt running)

What was also obvious from his attitude and actions on the track is that he is, according to his publicist, “a Bible-believing, God-honoring, Jesus-worshiping Christian.”

Slide (Bolt praying)

And all the commentators agreed that Bolt is the greatest sprinter of all time. And I am here to tell you that what Usain Bolt is to running, or what Mount Everest is to climbers,

Slide

the New Testament book of Romans is to the letters of the New Testament. It is simply the pre-eminent letter, covering the key doctrines of the Christian faith. And it has been the cause under God of many of the great revivals and reformations in the church. Let me give you just three examples.

Slide Augustine

In September of AD 386 a 32-year old native of North Africa who had been a professor for several years in Milan, Italy, sat weeping in a walled garden one day over his life of debauchery and sensual lust. He heard a child singing in some sort of game “tolle, lege, tolle, lege” which means “Take up and read...” He picked up an open scroll of the book of Romans, and read from Romans 13:13,14,

Slide

“Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.” His name was Augustine of Hippo, and he submitted himself to God and became one of the greatest theologians of the early church, basing much of his theology on this epistle.

Slide Luther

This epistle was instrumental in Martin Luther’s conversion from a guilt-ridden monk to the founder of the reformation. He later wrote:

Slide

“I greatly longed to understand Paul’s epistle to the Romans, and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, ‘the justice of God,’ because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage Him. Therefore, I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against Him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what He meant.

Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that ‘the just shall live by faith.’ Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before ‘the justice of God’ had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressible sweet in greater love. The passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven...”

And finally, an ordained minister of the Church of England by the name of John Wesley who had recently returned to London after an unsuccessful and discouraging ministry of two years in Savannah, Georgia. He then experienced conversion as he trusted Christ for salvation; writing about this later he said

Slide Wesley

“In the evening I went very unwilling to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s ‘Preface’ to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”

And John Wesley, together with his brother Charles and John Whitfield, preached throughout England and brought a revival of faith to that country and, according to some historians, helped save it from the bloody revolution that took place in France.

It is my privilege today to begin a new preaching series on Paul’s letter to the Romans. In this letter Paul lays out the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the foundation and core of our faith, and our series is titled “Unashamed of the gospel: Paul’s letter to the Romans”

Slide

Let us begin by reading the first seven verses, which I have titled “The gospel in a nutshell”

Rom 1:1-7

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, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

NIV

A short passage, but packed with key truths about the writer Paul and about the good news he preached. We can unpack this passage under six headings:

Slide

1. Paul’s person
2. Paul’s gospel
3. Paul’s Lord
4. Paul’s ministry
5. Paul’s readers
6. Paul’s greeting

1. Paul's Person

Let us begin with Paul's person. Who was he, and how did he come to be writing this letter? Many of you will know his story, but let us review it briefly so we are all on the same page. The man we now call Paul was born a Jew in the city of Tarsus

Slide map

and was named Saul after the first king of Israel. Tarsus was a center of Greek learning and culture, and young Saul may have received training there as well as in Jerusalem under the famous rabbi Gamaliel. Under Gamaliel he would have memorized and learned to interpret the Jewish bible according to rabbinical principles, and his natural abilities marked him out for leadership. His father was a Roman citizen, so he was one too, so he had a privileged position in both Roman and Jewish society. When he heard about the new sect of Christ-followers that was filling Jerusalem with its teaching that Jesus was the promised Jewish Messiah he was deeply offended, and devoted himself to hunting down these heretics and putting them in jail or to death. In his zeal for the Jewish law he even got approval to travel to Damascus, about a six day journey from Jerusalem, to arrest any Christ-followers there. However, while on the road to Damascus Jesus Christ appeared to him in a flash of light from heaven, and Saul the persecutor was marvelously and eternally transformed. He immediately began to preach and teach that Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah, and he made three immensely important missionary journeys around the Roman world. He adopted the Roman name of Paul on the first journey, and he wrote his letter to the Romans on his third journey, most probably while staying in the city of Corinth in the early spring of AD 58.

So that is a brief summary of what we know about Paul from the New Testament. But how does he describe himself? He tells us three things about himself.

Slide

1a. A servant of Christ Jesus

Paul describes himself as a servant of Christ Jesus. The word translated "servant" is the Greek word "doulos" which literally means slave or bond-servant. Paul is telling his readers that in spite of all his learning, in spite of all his ability as an evangelist, he is simply a bond-servant of his Lord, Jesus Christ. In this he was simply following the example of the Lord Jesus, who said (Mark 10:45)

Slide

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

What an amazing statement! Here is our Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of Man and Son of God, saying that He came to this world of ours to serve wretched sinful human beings, and then to give his life as a ransom for us. And Paul, the greatest missionary the world has seen, saying that he is only a servant of this servant king.

And right away there is a lesson for us. Those of us who are Christ-followers are called to this same lifestyle of servanthood. This is the plain teaching of our Lord:

Slide

Mark 10:42-45

"You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

So we are all called to be servants, and especially servants of one-another in God's church. Let me bold to ask you "How is your serve?" I thank God that He has given so many servants to this church, and that frankly is the main reason this church has worked for almost 50 years.

Slide

1b. called to be an apostle

Paul was called by Jesus Christ to be an apostle, that is a messenger of the gospel. This happened on the road to Damascus, where Jesus appeared to him and said

Slide

Acts 9:5-6 "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,".. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." And later God told a nervous to go and pray for Paul to receive his sight back again: Ananias Acts 9:15-16. But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.

Slide

1c. Set apart for the gospel of God

Paul's calling was not simply to share any old message; it was specifically to preach the gospel of God. He tells us more about this gospel in the next verse, so we can just note that the word "gospel" is a translation of "euangelion" which literally means "good news". But it is not just good news in general, but the "good news of God". It is not man's good news, but God's good news for man.

Slide

2. Paul's gospel

Paul tells us two things about this gospel.

2a. (It was) promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures

Paul tell his readers that this gospel, this good news, was not some recent change in God's plan for mankind. It was not as if God woke up one day and said "things are in pretty bad shape down there on earth; I had better do something about it". No indeed!! This good news was something that God built into the very fabric of creation. When God created trees, He knew that one of them would be used to make a cross on which his son would be crucified; when God put iron ore in the earth he knew that it would be used to make nails to nail his son to that cross. And through all of the Old Testament we see prophecies of the coming of the Messiah, seen most clearly in Isaiah 53

Slide

Isa 53:3-6

3 He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.

Like one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

4 Surely he took up our infirmities
and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered him stricken by God,
smitten by him, and afflicted.

5 But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

So the gospel Paul preached, and the gospel we continue to preach today, was something that God had planned from before the beginning of time.

Slide

2b. (it is) regarding his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

The only gospel worth the name of good news is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Other religions may and do often have illuminating and even some good teachings, but these are nothing compared with the purity and truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The New Zealand-born minister and evangelist Ray Comfort wrote an article with the following introduction:

Imagine that you were offered a choice of four gifts:

- The original Mona Lisa
- The keys to a brand new Lamborghini
- A million dollars in cash
- A parachute

You can pick only one. Which would you choose? Before you decide, here's some information that will help you to make the *wisest* choice:

You have to jump 10,000 feet out of an airplane.

Does that help you to connect the dots? It should, because you need the parachute. It's the only one of the four gifts that will help with your dilemma. The others may have some value, but they are useless when it comes to facing the law of gravity in a 10,000-foot fall. The knowledge that you will have to jump should produce a healthy fear in you—and that kind of fear is good because it can save your life. He then goes on

Now think of the four major religions:

- Hinduism
- Buddhism
- Islam
- Christianity

Which one should you choose? Before you decide, here's some information that will help you determine which one is the *wisest* choice:

*All of humanity stands on the edge of eternity. We are **all** going to die. We will all have to pass through the door of death. It could happen to us in twenty years, or in six months...or today. For most of humanity, death is a huge and terrifying plummet into the unknown. So what should we do?*

And he goes on to show why Christianity, with Jesus Christ at its core, is the only faith that gives confidence to us as we faced death.

If you are not yet a believer in Jesus Christ, please listen carefully to what I say next, because it could make all the difference to you in this world and the next.

Slide

3. Paul's Lord

We learn two key truths about the Lord Jesus from this passage:

3a. as to his human nature was a descendant of David

In the first place Jesus was fully human, and was in fact a descendant of David. The fact that Jesus was fully human is important to us because it means that he know what it is like to be human; he knows our weaknesses, he understands what it means to be tempted, and he knew real physical pain when he hung on the cross for our sins. The writer to the Hebrews makes this point clearly in describing Jesus as our High Priest

Slide

Heb 4:14-16

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Slide

3b. who was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead.

And Jesus was also the son of God. He always was God’s son, dating back to all eternity past, but he was finally revealed to be God’s son by his resurrection from the dead. Now you cannot have a resurrection without first having a death, and we know from Scripture that Jesus died on the Roman instrument of execution, the cross.

Slide

3c through the Spirit of holiness

Jesus was declared to be the Son of God “through the Spirit of holiness”, that is the Holy Spirit. So here we have the Trinity in action; Jesus Christ being declared to be the Son of God through the Holy Spirit raising him from the dead.

We read together the Apostles’ Creed, which reads in part

Slide

I believe...

in Jesus Christ, His only Son, Our Lord,

Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended into Hell; the third day He rose again from the dead;

He ascended into Heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God, the Father almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

Slide

And then we sang

Christ alone, cornerstone
Weak made strong, in the Saviour's love
Through the storm, He is Lord
Lord of all

Yes, says Paul, Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of his ministry

Yes, Christ-followers sing, Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of our faith; through the storm he is Lord of all

How about you? Is Jesus Christ your cornerstone? Where is your parachute as you face the reality of a plunge into death, whether it is in 50 years or 5 years or 5 months or 5 days or 5 hours?

Slide

4. Paul's ministry

4a. Through him (Jesus) and for his name's sake we received grace and apostleship

In the first place Paul's ministry was not something he chose for himself; quite the reverse! Left to himself he would have remained a Pharisee and a persecutor of the church, but through Jesus he received grace and his mission.

Slide

4b. to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith

Paul's specific ministry was to the Gentiles, that is to say everyone who was not a Jew. This was a huge change for Paul who was raised as a strict Pharisee, and it illustrates the power of the gospel in transforming his life.

But the other thing Paul says is that his ministry is "to call people...to the obedience that comes from faith" This statement is another insight into the nature of the gospel. Men and women become Christians by faith in Jesus Christ. So Paul can write elsewhere

Slide

Eph 2:8-9

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.

But he then goes on immediately to say

Eph 2:10

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

So we are saved by faith, and in response to that saving faith we become obedient to God and to his commands. So to those of you who are Christ-followers, how has your faith impacted your obedience to God and his commands?

Slide

5. Paul's readers

5a. And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

These Roman Christians were called to belong to Jesus Christ; this is a theme that will come up in more detail later, so we can omit a detailed discussion

5b. To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints:

They were also loved by God. What an amazing truth this is; that the God of the universe loves us!!

Slide

6. Paul's greeting

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

What a wonderful greeting: grace and peace, two of the blessings that come from life in Christ

Conclusion

These few verses contain some key truths for both Christ-followers and those of us who are still figuring out what all this means.

For those of us who are Christ-followers, we are *challenged* by Paul's example of faithful service, as well as *encouraged* by the fact that Jesus Christ is indeed God, and that he knows and loves each one of us.

For those of us who are still seeking to figure out if all this is true, let me challenge you to consider the truth that Jesus Christ was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead, and to ask yourself “if this is true, why am I not willing to trust my life to him?” If you want help to understand this, please see me or a Christian friend after the service.

This short section of Paul’s letter to the Romans gives us a foretaste of the riches to come. Stay tuned for next week’s message, when Chris Faith will expound Romans 1:8-17

May the Lord bless you

Amen