



"Could You Use Some Really Great Good News?" Have you ever seen a headline like this on your favorite news program or website? I doubt it.

Most of us will never forget where we were 14 years ago last Friday. I remember the shock and fear and anger we felt on 9/11. I remember a prayer meeting in my church that night that was standing room only. I remember thinking, "The world has forever changed." I remember the headline splashed across the cover of *Time* magazine, "Why Do They Hate Us So Much?"

Our news outlets seem to remind us minute by minute that in our world right now, most news is bad. We don't need news outlets reminding us and we don't need a PhD to enlighten us that no matter what people on earth seem to try, things go from bad to worse for most. History repeats itself. Kingdoms rise and fall. No matter how modern we get, our sin leaks out of us way too often. The capacity for sin and evil and even the push toward sin and evil is in us and around us all the time.

If I were to step into a different reality and for a moment completely ignore what the Bible says about sin, pretending I had never read the book of Romans, I would still have to be honest and admit that it seems that people from every nation, every tribe, are being held in some kind of invisible grip. More honesty. It's as if the people I love and care most about, the people I work with, live with, and are friends with are also held in this invisible grip. More honesty. I also battle this invisible grip. The grip may be invisible but the effects are plain to see. Why does the human being make wrong decisions? Why does the human being not see the harm their wrong decisions place upon themselves, the people they love, and the least among us in society?

I recently read a poem by Edna Millay called *Lament*. A line from that poem is, "Life must go on; I forget just why." I believe honest people are trying to figure this out. I believe honest people ask questions like:

- Who and what are we? What does it mean to be a human being?
- Is there such a thing as "morality," right and wrong? If so what is its basis; how does one know the good and the bad?
- What is the meaning of history? Or, is there any meaning?
- What is wrong with us? Something is off; what is it?

- Is there a solution? Can things be fixed? By whom? How? How quickly?
- Is there a God? If so can this God be known? And is this God involved in this corrupt world, especially relative to human suffering?

The book of Romans addresses every one of these questions. The book of Romans tells us that sin is always bad news. That misery, sorrow and hopelessness are guaranteed for those taken captive by sin. Sure, we get tidbits of seemingly good news sprinkled into our lives. But more and more these only seem like short vacations from the bad.

The essence of Paul's letter to the Romans is that there is good news: Really great good news. The first 7 verses of Romans is the entire thrust of the 16 chapters in the book. In these few verses, Paul unfolds at least 5 pieces of this Really Great Good News. Before we look at this good news, I want to have you look with me for a moment at the famous author of this letter to the Romans.

Travel back with me to the winter of AD 57, about 25 years after Jesus' death. We imagine ourselves in a wealthy city on a narrow land bridge just off the coast of mainland Greece. The city is Corinth. There is a man pacing the floor, pouring out his thoughts. He speaks with passion while another man named Tertius, his companion, is likely seated at a table attempting to take detailed notes on a scroll trying to keep up with the brilliance that poured forth from his friend's mouth, not wanting to miss a single word. Tertius had to know that he was a part of something much bigger than he and his friend at that table. He had to know that the words he recorded actually were inspired words from God himself colored with the calling, the passion, the personality and the intellect of his friend.

The one who speaks has a strength about him, but his shoulders are rounded, his arms and face bear the marks of wind, sun, age and mistreatment. His fingers are knotted and curled and fused at unnatural angles; signs of multiple stonings. His body is beaten down but in his eyes you see fire, zeal and youthful energy. His name is Paul. Paul from Tarsus.

The document he is preparing will eventually become the Apostle's letter to the church in Rome. It will be the most significant piece of literature that the Lord would ever commission Paul to write. Little does Paul realize the impact it will have for centuries to come. Augustine, this pagan hedonist, would find

faith after reading this letter. Martin Luther, in a deep study of Romans, will reintroduce to the church the good news of the truth of justification by grace alone, through faith alone. In fact Martin Luther wrote in the preface of his commentary on Romans, "This letter is truly the most important piece in the New Testament. It is purest Gospel. It is well worth a Christian's while to memorize it word for word but also to occupy himself with it daily, as though it were the daily bread of the soul. It is impossible to read or to meditate on this letter too much or too well. The more one deals with it, the more precious it becomes and the better it tastes."

The letter will ignite the mind of American Puritan Jonathon Edwards and bring revival to America. It would warm the heart of a confused John Wesley and clarify the gospel for him and he would go on to start Methodism. It would fuel the revival fire in the United States through thousands of sermons given by a fiery preacher named George Whitfield. And today at CPC we are privileged to study this letter together. May this letter bring to us revival, clarification and fuel.

The Apostle Paul was born in the cosmopolitan city of Tarsus, which is in modern-day Turkey. He matured in the shadow of the great temple in Jerusalem at the feet of the great rabbi Gamaaleel ul. He was a Roman citizen, but first a Jewish Pharisee. He devoted himself to the study of the law and fulfilling every letter of the tradition.

He wanted to become what the temple represented—everything that is sacred, strong, undefiled—a worthy vessel of the righteousness of God. But one day this man's life took an unexpected turn. Paul was doing his usual Pharisee thing. He took a business trip from Jerusalem to Damascus, Syria. The purpose of his trip was to persecute and arrest Christians in Damascus. While on the road, Paul was confronted by the risen Jesus Christ. Christ rebuked him, gave him new eyes, a new horizon, and set him on a new course to serve Him.

God taught Paul that the righteousness he wanted more than life itself could not be found in traditions and religion, but in the very faith of the people he sought to kill. Soon, these very people would show their former persecutor supernatural grace.

Christ changed Paul. His future would now be with Gentiles, preaching grace and living by faith. Instead of stamping out Christianity, he would be a tireless apostle traveling more than 20,000 miles between Jerusalem and Rome on three separate missionary journeys. He would write over half of our New Testament.

Paul wrote Romans in Corinth, in the middle of his third missionary journey. After writing Romans, he headed back to Jerusalem carrying with him an offering collected from the wealthy believers in Corinth to give to the poor believers suffering in Jerusalem.

Paul's vision was for a fourth missionary journey and that was to Rome, to deliver his letter personally to the church, and then he had his eye on Spain as a new mission field. He never made it to Spain, and he never made it to Rome as a free man.

At the time this letter was written, Rome had about 1,000,000 people in the city. It was a tale of two cities. If you were rich and free, it was an exciting place to live, the center of art and culture. If you were poor it meant a life of squalor in tenements with no sanitation and street crime. About half of the people who lived in the city of Rome were bond-servants. Remember this, half the population were slaves with no rights, but with the hope that if they worked hard enough their masters might some day set them free.

It was especially hard to be Christian in this time, but in a few years it would be horrific. Emperor Nero would go insane and falsely blame Christians for the problems in the empire. Eventually Christianity would become illegal and deadly. So imagine being a Christian and a slave. This was at least half of Paul's original audience, and that would explain the words he uses to begin his letter. To the Christians in Rome, Paul writes:

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

Like all ancient letters, the writer begins by introducing himself. Paul gives himself the title "servant." Unthinkable for a proud Roman citizen to describe himself as a servant. The word in the original language means slave. It's the most lowly humble term for slave in the Greek language. It means owned by another, one who has been purchased. It indicates once a slave, he will always be one. I could see Paul thinking, before Damascus, I was a slave to sin, now I am a slave to Christ forever. Further, the idea is that he is a voluntary slave. He has the freedom not to be a slave, but because of his love for his master he chooses not to leave his master.

Apostle—this title is the opposite of servant. In fact he doesn't view this title as one he gives himself but as one given to him by God. A title of great authority, called to that position and titled by Jesus Christ himself to be one who is literally sent.

The wording "set apart" in the original language means separated, or moved away apart from everything else. Paul was set apart, a chosen vessel to spread this gospel. The word in the original language for "set apart" sounds like the English word for horizon. It made sense that God has placed him in a new reality, a new and wonderful horizon, impossible to see without Christ picking him up and moving him into a new reality, one without limits with new boundaries established by God, not the world.

The word gospel is used 60 times in Romans. It literally means Good News. The first piece of really great good news is that the Good News is from God.

The Good News Originates from God

In Roman times a town crier would go about town and if he had good news he would say, "Good News (or Gospel)—Our Emperor and God Caesar defeated the barbarians in Gaul. Good News—Caesar likes anchovies on his salad and decreed that we should like them in our salads too."

Paul wanted his readers to know that his Good News is not **from** man, it is **for** man. He wanted them to know it was not created by Paul. That there was nothing like it that ever existed until God revealed it and entrusted it to him and the other apostles. You and I must have this conviction. The Good News is not religion from man, in fact it is no religion at all. It's God's own good news for a world void of any really great good news.

"the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures..." (v. 2).

The second piece of really great Good News is that this Good News was planned from the beginning and promised in the Old Testament Scriptures.

The Good News was Promised in the Scriptures

This Good News is found within the old news of the Hebrew Scriptures delivered by the Old Testament prophets, now being fulfilled and completed in Jesus Christ. It is estimated that there are at least 330 different prophecies in the Old Testament about Christ. Jesus himself said, *"I did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, I came to fulfill what they said"* (Mt. 5:17-18).

In my study I learned that there are 51 direct quotes and 10 additional references to the Old Testament in this letter.

"regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord" (verses 3-4).

Paul now describes Jesus by two contrasting statements of title. This is so well presented. The first title is "descendant of David." The word "was" is *ginomai*, which is best translated "became." So at a specific point in time, a point in history, Jesus was born of a virgin and became a man, a humble man, a full man, a descendant of David.

The second title is "Son of God in Power." Paul says that Jesus was appointed "Son of God in power through the Spirit of Holiness or Holy Spirit." Another way of looking at it is "declared to be the powerful Son of God by His resurrection from the dead." Remember, the New Testament teaches that Jesus was always the Son of God. But prior to the resurrection we see his humble and meek nature more prominently. Only occasionally did we see his full glory and power revealed through his miracles and transfiguration. Paul is saying that after Jesus was raised from the dead his title "Son of God" in power is validated. He will forever be exalted as the Son of God in glory and power.

The third piece of really great Good News is that God's Good News is about Jesus fully God and fully man. The good news is about a person, not a concept.

The Good News at Its Substance is Jesus Christ Our Lord

It's about him, not us. It's not a message about our lives, our dreams and our hopes. The good news speaks to and transforms all those things, but only because it isn't about us. The good news is a declaration about Jesus Christ our Lord. Let's look closer at Paul's declaration.

- The name Jesus means Savior
- The name Christ means Anointed One
- The name Lord means Sovereign Ruler

He is Jesus because he saves people from their sins. He is Christ because he is anointed by God as King. And he is Lord because he is God, the Sovereign Ruler of the universe. The demand of the gospel is to respond to Jesus Christ Our Lord.

Could it be that many of us have been brought into faith with the idea that we can have Jesus (Savior) and Christ (King), but we don't embrace him as Lord? Could we be looking at the wrong horizon? Do we see ourselves as having faith, but no repentance or obedience? Brought into the family of God, but no life transformation needed? Waiting for heaven in the next world without serving Christ in this world?

Jesus served us as Savior, but then calls us to serve him as Lord. If that is not our mentality it is troubling because we are being robbed of the Really Great Good News.

I hear too many times people say, "I accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior, but my life didn't really change." The New Testament believers celebrated the Lordship of Christ. With all due respect we downgrade it. But we can't divide him into pieces. *"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord"* (Luke 2:11). Peter in his first sermon preached this, *"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."* Jesus is Lord. He crushed the power of sin. He crushed the power of death. He crushed the power of hell and that is why he, Jesus Christ our Lord, is able to save people.

There is a great interest in Christ the Savior but a strange reluctance to Christ the Lord. What makes the Lordship of Jesus Christ Good News? Paul addresses this in verses 5-7.

"Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake."

The fourth piece of really great Good News is that God extends his offer of the Good News to everyone. It is salvation for all, but in addition it's an opportunity for true life transformation.

The Purpose of the Good News is Obedience that Comes from Faith

So here is another brilliant phrasing by Paul. The Good News places a demand on us: Obedience of Faith. What does that mean? It means that obedience and faith always belong together and it is the outcome that Paul intends for us as we respond to the Good News. Remember Abraham from The Story? It was by faith... Abraham obeyed. We will see all throughout Romans that the proper response to the gospel is faith alone. But then we will see that it's through faith that true life-change, true obedience, true change makes us like Jesus.

The purpose of the Gospel is to draw out from all of us an obedience to Jesus Christ that always involves faith, faith at the point of conversion and faith and trust every day after that. Obedience that God loves is always connected to faith and true faith shows the fruit of obedience. "Genuine Faith gives birth to obedience, and genuine obedience springs from faith." -- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*.

The bottom line is: Our Lord and the gospel demands our whole heart. And then he assures us why this demand makes sense.

"And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ" (verses 6-7).

The fifth piece of Good News is that we receive a new identity, a new benevolent master, a new reason to live. Our sin and rebellion that should have led to permanent separation, abandonment and despair, God's wrath on us. That's the bad news. But the Good News is that God buys us back and owns us forever. We become his.

The Privilege of the Gospel is Being Wholly Owned By God

The New Testament believers grasped that their highest good was to be wholly owned by the Son of God. Paul says, "Jesus Christ is our Lord. We are wholly owned by him. We belong to him. Christ as owner has the right to lay claim to our energy, our intellect, our gifting, our time, our dreams, our family, our retirement." You might be asking, How can that possibly be really great good news? Here is why. Jesus said, **"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily**

and follow me." Then he gives the reason, **"For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it"** (Luke 9:23-24). The really great good news is that being wholly owned by Jesus Christ our Lord can be our greatest joy. New Testament believers grasped that if being wholly owned by Christ is our highest good, then being his servant is the best possible news.

Remember how Paul, a Roman citizen and former Pharisee, introduced himself back in verse 1 to a bunch of lowly Roman believers? Servant. There is a story in the Old Testament that sheds light on what happens when we accept the good news of the gospel. In ancient Israel if you owed someone a debt that you could not pay you could literally sell yourself to that person and work for them as a hired person to pay off the debt. Doesn't sound like a very happy life, does it? In Deuteronomy it says that God gave laws to protect the poor to remove generational poverty. After six years of work, in the seventh year all debts were cancelled and servants were set free. How would you like a mortgage with that provision?

Now suppose that over the six years of working for a person you came to love him and his family. Your life is bound up in their lives. You can't imagine living without them. If a servant came to this conclusion the Old Testament came up with this provision. **"If your servant says to you, 'I do not want to leave you' because he loves you and your family and is well off with you, then take an awl and push it through his ear lobe into the door, and he will become your servant for life"** (Deut. 15:16-17). This will permanently mark you as property of your master.

Try to imagine the scene. You say, "I don't want to leave. I don't want a life without you. Here is an awl. Pierce my ear against your door. I want to be your willing servant for life. I have no greater joy than to serve you and your family." When we grasp that belonging to Christ is the best news ever, then being permanently marked with a spiritual awl in our hearts and being wholly owned by him will be our greatest joy.

Could you use some really great Good News? God has given us the Good News of Jesus Christ to accomplish God's purposes. May God give you grace and peace and a new horizon as we study Romans together.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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