

## Romans 1:1-17

Paul's letter to the Romans is his gospel proclamation for both Jewish and gentile believers in Rome, written in preparation for his upcoming visit there. The introduction is a roadmap for what follows, inviting us into the dynamic interaction between Paul's textualized gospel and the world that needs the gospel, then and now. His self-introduction takes into account that these believers in Jesus Christ already know a lot about the gospel, though they know it from someone else.

Paul begins his letter by giving some information about himself, and from the very beginning, he weaves his own life with the life of Christ. After indicating his name, *Paulos*, he immediately follows it with a qualification that defines his own identity much more precisely, slave of Christ Jesus. This designation indicates who Paul's master is and thus, in whose authority he addresses the congregations in Rome.

In the Roman world, a slave was considered good if he or she reflected the will of his or her master and adapted his or her own will to the will of the master. Paul is not speaking out of his own mind, but, as a slave, reflects the will and authority of his master, Christ. In addition, the designation 'slave' is precisely one of the identities that the members of the Roman churches are invited to adopt for themselves. Paul is modelling a self-understanding that he hopes those he is addressing in Rome will also accept.

Having established through the designation 'slave' that he is doing the bidding of a master, Paul then clarifies his purpose, which is here coined in terms recalling the vocation of prophets: he is called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel or good news of God. The purpose or direction of his call is towards the gospel of God. In this brief introduction, Paul has conveyed that he is not his own master, that he is writing on behalf of Christ and is acting with a purpose, towards a goal which is the gospel of God.

His next move is to augment his self-presentation by developing or explaining exactly what he means by gospel of God. He does this by describing the good news as having been announced in the scriptures through the prophets and being about the son. The son is described as being of the seed of David, according to the flesh. He is then established as son of God as a result of his resurrection from the dead, and identified as "Jesus Christ our Lord". The language that Paul uses when talking about Jesus, is anchored in the Jewish tradition, and respects the Jewish notion that the messiah comes from Davidic descent, while also giving Jesus his "superhuman" dimension as son of God.

Paul defines two specific aspects of his message about Jesus, drawing on an ancient creedal formula. First, yes, Jesus is of the line of David. However, Jesus was not the one and only descendant from David's line. There were untold numbers of Davidic descendants in the first century. Just think of Solomon, David's son who had a thousand wives, and who

knows how many descendants they were responsible for. The important point here was that Jesus was “appointed” son of God through his resurrection.

The translation “appointed” from the original Greek, is more accurate than translations which use “declared.” Paul is thinking about Jesus as a human being, and claiming that Jesus’ resurrection is the time when Jesus is enthroned to rule over the world on God’s behalf. This draws on a rich biblical tradition in which the Davidic king was adopted as God’s son at his enthronement, so Jesus, actually was not the first or only son of God in the Jewish understanding or tradition.

The promise of a Davidic messiah has been fulfilled through God’s raising Jesus from the dead and enthroning him as Lord over all. The gospel, then, is not the human response to the Christ event, but the Christ event itself.

Through the evangelistic efforts of Paul, the Church of Jesus spread throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond. As Paul moved from community to community, churches were formed in two ways. First, Paul evangelized in synagogues amongst his own Jewish community. Then Paul turned his efforts to evangelizing pagans or Gentiles.

Paul had not yet visited Rome when he wrote this letter. He wrote most of his letters to churches that he himself had established. But the church

at Rome was different. There were already many Christians in Rome long before Paul arrived there.

Around the year 30 C.E., the first Christian church began in Jerusalem, on Pentecost, originally a Jewish celebration. On that day, Peter preached to the many visitors who had come to Jerusalem for the celebration. Among them were visitors from Rome, both Jews and Gentiles who followed the Jewish religion. Some of these were among the 3,000 that became Christians on Pentecost and carried the gospel to Rome with them.

Paul probably wrote his last letter to the Romans around the year 57 while still in Corinth. Paul established churches in numerous cities around the Mediterranean, but he was very careful never to upset the work of any other leaders or founders. However, the church in Rome was different ... it was not the result of the work of any one particular person. So Paul would not be upsetting anyone's authority or leadership by visiting Rome. For many years, Paul had wanted to visit the Christians in Rome. He had accomplished all his work in the east. There were elders or leaders in the church to take care of the new churches. Paul was hoping to visit Rome on his way to Spain.

So, when Paul writes to the community in Rome, he addresses a community he has not founded, a community unlike the other communities to which he sent letters. Because of this odd situation, Paul

saw a need to justify why he writes in order to prepare his visit and then ask for support for his mission. So, in the opening section of his letter, Paul is able to show how he and the Roman community are interconnected and therefore have some obligations to each other.

In ancient letter writing, it was customary to signal the main topics in the opening lines. One of the first things we discover is that the gospel Paul proclaims is part of a larger story. It is an act of God that God had previously promised in scripture. Before the gospel is about our faith toward God, it is about God keeping faith with us. The content of this message is Jesus Christ.

The gospel commission Paul receives is to bring about “obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for his name’s sake”. For those of us who are heirs of the Reformation tradition, it is important to note that Paul does not separate faith and works. On the contrary, his mission is to bring about the works or obedience that flow from faith. Perhaps “trust” comes closer to the mark of capturing the active nature of faith than the word “faith” does for many of us, so his mission could be seen as bringing about the works that flow from trust - trust in Christ and his promises.

The inclusion of the Gentiles is a crucial component of Paul’s message. Human obedience to God must be as broad as Jesus’ lordship. It is not enough for God to save Israel, as fulfilment of God’s promise in

scripture; instead, both Gentiles and Jews must live into the new reality that has begun with Jesus' resurrection-enthronement.

First, Paul says he is not ashamed of the gospel. We now know that the gospel of which he speaks is the announcement that David's heir has been raised from the dead and thereby enthroned as king at God's right hand. Second, Paul says that this gospel is the "power of God unto salvation". We have seen what this power looks like — it is resurrection power, by the Spirit. Paul expects that God's people live lives of resurrection power, now, by the Holy Spirit.

Third, Paul says that this power is available to all who believe, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. The Gospel of Jesus as resurrected Lord comes "to the Jew first" because God had made this promise of salvation through a Davidic Messiah through Israel's scriptures. It is "also to the Greek" because Jesus is Lord over all.

Fourth, this gospel manifests the righteousness of God. "Righteousness" is a loaded theological word, but generally speaking it means to do what is right. "The right" varies depending on the relationship. For God, this means making good on God's promises to Israel. The resurrection of Jesus manifests God's covenant faithfulness, God's righteousness.

We are now in a position to see how "faith" fits into the picture. It is not human faith, our response to the gospel, that puts God's righteousness

on display. Instead, it is God's own act in raising Jesus from the dead. This is the likely meaning of the scripture citation from Habakkuk. When Paul quotes the verse that says, "The one who is righteous will live by faith", the reader already knows who this "one" is who "lives" by faith: it is Jesus who was raised from the dead.

The faith (perhaps, better, faithfulness) through which Jesus is made alive is his own faithfulness to God in going to the cross, and God's faithfulness in raising Jesus from the dead. When Paul says that the righteousness of God is put on display "through faith", he is referring to the Christ event.

God's faithfulness must then be met with a human response of faith or "for faith". This is the charge to which Jesus has called Paul, to bring about the obedience of faith among the Gentiles.

Before all else, the gospel is about God: what God has done in sending God's son; what God has done in raising Jesus from the dead; what God has done in enthroning even the human Jesus as God's right hand. This gospel is mirrored in the human sphere. Because the story is one of God's faithfulness to the faithful Christ, God's people are now defined as those who are faithful to the resurrected messiah.

The gospel about Christ makes Paul who he is, but it also calls into existence his addressees, the Roman Christians, who are also called to

belong to Jesus Christ. Because of the good news of Jesus, both Paul and the members of the Roman church have received grace and apostleship. Christ unites them in the gift of grace and apostleship.

So, in summary, Paul has several reasons for this letter: to prepare the church in Rome for his visit; to give a clear explanation of the gospel; to give the truth about the Christian faith to any Christians in Rome who had false ideas about it; to give practical advice about how Christians should behave towards each other; to give practical advice about how Christians should behave towards their rulers; to unite Jewish and Gentile Christians.

In addition, Paul's letter was written to urge the Christians in Rome to help Paul in his work. He might need their help in order to continue his journey to Spain. And he needed the Christians in Rome to support and to encourage him with their prayers.

Paul says that this gospel is the "power of God unto salvation." We have seen what this power looks like ~ it is resurrection power, by the Spirit. This power is available to all who believe, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 'Greek' did not merely mean 'people who came from Greece'. It meant those people who spoke the Greek language. It also meant those who followed the Greek culture.

Paul has established the key identity of the Christ-believers: slaves of



Christ. He has shown the connection of the good news about Jesus with the Jewish Scriptures and has put into place a relation of mutual obligation and respect with a community he does not know. They are all children of God, and Paul counts on this kinship to build a community that will receive him with hospitality, and support him in his missionary efforts towards Spain.

Greek letters often included a prayer of thanksgiving to one of the gods, and Paul adapts this custom, thanking the true God: “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world.” This tells us that Paul prayed through Christ, and it also tells us that “all the world” doesn’t always mean the entire earth. In this case, it means the eastern Roman Empire. It was a figure of speech, not a geographical fact. Paul gave God the credit for these people’s faith. He didn’t thank the people for believing — he thanked God, because God is the one who enables people to believe. On our own, we would turn away.

Whatever faith we have, we need to thank God as the one who gives us that faith.

**Amen.**

## PRAYERS FOR EASTER 5 - MAY 7, 2023

(Loving God reveal your compassion...**and bring wholeness to all**)

God of all things seen and unseen, if you had insulated yourself from the pain of the world, then your name could not be love and our condition would be without hope. Thank you for being so personally involved, for revealing your complete commitment in Jesus of Nazareth. Through him we pray with hope, in him we pray with love.

Let your healing love be known this day by all who suffer in distress of mind, or agony of spirit or ailment of body.

Loving God, reveal your compassion ... **and bring wholeness to all.**

Let your intimate love be known today by all who feel forgotten or lost, and all who are walking in the dark valley of despair.

Loving God, reveal your compassion ... **and bring wholeness to all.**

Let your fierce love this day redress the wrongs of all who suffer exploitation, injustice, abuse, neglect, violence or unwarranted imprisonment.

Loving God, reveal your compassion ... **and bring wholeness to all.**

Let your nurturing love today encourage those who are gathering resolve to make tough decisions, take on new responsibilities, or break free from some bondage.

Loving God, reveal your compassion ... **and bring wholeness to all.**

Let your steadfast love, mercy, justice, and grace permeate the reign of King Charles as head of the Commonwealth of Nations. May he and his Queen Consort and their extended family bring freshness of ideas and relevance into their service to the countries within the Commonwealth, and to you their Lord and King.

Loving God, reveal your compassion ... **and bring wholeness to all.**

Let your relentless love this day upset congregations that have become self-centred or even contemptuous of other churches.

Loving God, reveal your compassion ... **and bring wholeness to all.**

Let your reconciling love today gather together the separated Christians, and make them aware of the fellowship and mission of the one, universal body of Christ.

Loving God, reveal your compassion ... **and bring wholeness to all.**

Let your compassionate love help us to remember the murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls, and two spirit individuals, and their families who are grieving their loss. Comfort them and give them the hope and determination to speak truth to power which is still so often reflective of historical, systemic colonialism. Help us all to commit together to working towards correcting the injustices and harm done to so many of our indigenous sisters.

Loving God, reveal your compassion ... **and bring wholeness to all.**

Let your inspiring love this day rejuvenate pastors, priests and prophets who have become weary to the very roots of their souls. Be with those in our Synod who are gathering this week for study, learning, fellowship and rest.

Loving God, reveal your compassion ... **and bring wholeness to all.**

Let your caring love bless the springtime bursting forth with rich soil for planting, cool rains to water, sufficient sun to cause that which is planted to flourish. We pray especially for regions experiencing drought. Send rains to Jaen, Spain, the Po River Valley, Italy, and Alberta as they fight their wildfires. We pray for other areas within our province experiencing devastating flooding in their communities. Send the necessary resources to deal with these extreme climate effects.

Loving God, reveal your compassion ... **and bring wholeness to all.**

Let your heart-breaking love support those facing evil regimes that kill your people, causing entire nations to weep and mourn, especially in Ukraine in its second year of fighting, and United States where mass shootings are happening all too frequently. Today we remember the victims of the latest mass shooting in Alabama.

Loving God, reveal your compassion ... **and bring wholeness to all.**

As we live in the grace of being Easter people, knowing we are saved and cherished, we pray for more than we can know – for your whole world.

Christ is risen! Alleluia! **Alleluia! He is risen indeed!**

God in Community, Holy One, hear us as we pray:

**Our Father ...**