



The Great Gospel

Romans 1:1-2

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Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. I'd like to read the entirety of Paul's salutation, the first seven verses, and then we will focus on verses 1-2.

"Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, to all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. O Lord, we ask that you would open up your Word to us, that we might see the Lord Jesus Christ, that we might see him in all of his glory and magnificence, that we might in it see all that he has done for us. We ask, O Lord, that you would bind us to yourself. This we ask even in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ, amen.

What is the gospel? If you have been in a church at any point in time in your life prior to this you have heard the phrase *the gospel*. Perhaps you have wondered a bit what the whole meaning of that is, because it seems that in our day and age the term *gospel* fluctuates. It is used throughout the world to describe what is important to people. There is "the gospel according to Apple" or "the gospel according to Honda" or "the gospel according to financial institutions."

We use it in that kind of common parlance in our world, and it simply means something important. There has also been a tendency even within the church of Jesus Christ to take the word *gospel*, which is a noun, and make it an adjective. By that what it means is it makes something better. Time that we spend together if it's better is "gospel time." Relationships we have are made better if they're "gospel relationships." We simply tack *gospel* at the beginning of a phrase, and it makes things better.

So what is the point of the gospel? What does it mean? This morning we're going to look at the opening verses of Paul's letter to the Romans and see what the gospel is, because the gospel is the theme of Paul's letter. He begins prefiguring, as it were, his theme throughout the whole book to us in these opening verses. I'd like us to see three things about the gospel this morning.

First, *the gospel is good news*. This is at the heart of the gospel: the gospel is good news. But there's more than that. *The gospel is God's good news*. It's not just generically good news; it is God's good news. Finally, we will see that *the gospel is sure good news*. It is good news we can rely upon. It is a certainty of good news for us. The gospel is good news, the gospel is God's good news, and the gospel is sure good news.

The Gospel is Good News

Let's begin by looking at the opening verses of this letter, verses 1-2. This is typically what is called the *salutation* of the letter. It is historically the way in which we identify the sender of the letter and the recipient or recipients of the letter. If you want to think about it this way, the first few verses of this letter and Paul's other letters kind of form the same function as our envelopes do.

When you get something in the mail nowadays, *real* mail, mail you can touch not electronic mail, you look at it, and before you've even opened it you know who it's from. You know it's addressed to you, and if it's *not* addressed to you, if your mailman happens to put the wrong mail in your box, like he sometimes does in ours, you say, "Well, this is not for me," and you give it to someone else.

You look up in the top left and see who it has come from, and what you do with it might depend on who it has come from. If you see something like "Mail merge services" or "Discounted bulk mail rate," sometimes that gets filed in a round receptacle, but if it comes from a family member or from a dear friend you can't wait to open it up and see what it has for you. That's what Paul is doing for us this morning. He is setting the stage for his letter.

This is actually the longest salutation greeting Paul has in all of his letters. We're going to look at the main theme of this salutation. We're going to cover it over the next three weeks, including this week, but the first two verses explain where Paul is going in this letter. This letter is about the gospel of God. So what does that mean? *Gospel* is kind of a funny-sounding word. There's nothing that sounds like it outside of using the word *gospel* in church.

Well, the word *gospel* actually comes from two old English words that are put together, and it means simply good news. The interesting thing is that this perfectly translates the Greek original, because the Greek original word for gospel is one word made up of two separate parts...one that means good, one that means news. You put them together and get the word *good-news*.

It can be used most often as a noun, although it can be a verb. You can preach the gospel. You can bring the gospel, but in the main it is a message that has a substance. There is something the gospel is made up of. We can understand what the gospel is. We should understand that as Paul lays this out Paul is steeped in the story of the Bible. From the beginning of the Bible until this point the Bible is the story of how people are wrecked by sin.

The truth is we need this good news because we have bad news. We see bad news all around us. We see that people are selfish all the time. As a matter of fact, the most successful economic system in all of history relies on the fact that people are selfish. We don't need to ask people to be selfish; they naturally are. People are violent. The history of the world is filled with this, with wars and battles and attacks. We can easily see that people are violent.

There is bad news all around us, but the bad news is not just around us; the bad news is also *within* us. If we're honest with ourselves, we know we struggle to tell the truth when doing that would be to our disadvantage. We wonder just how much falsehood we can get away with. We hurt others. We regret things we've done. We understand that wickedness is not just outside us; it is in us.

The Bible confirms all of this. This is not unique. If you struggle with things you do, if you struggle with things you think, if you struggle with your relationships, you are not unique. I might say to you, "Join the club." It's a club made up of every man, woman, and child not only alive now but who has ever lived, save one. We know we need this good news because we have the bad news. It is a result of humanity's rebellion against God. That is what the bad news is.

So the gospel must be understood against the backdrop of bad news. It's like trying to see something white is easiest against a black backdrop. John Murray puts it this way: "The gospel as the power of God unto salvation is meaningless apart from sin, condemnation, misery, and death." If we are to understand what the good news is we must know the bad news, because that points to us that we need the good news.

The gospel is good news for us not just in the abstract. We get the good news of the gospel, and this is important because good news is hard to get. It's not just Christianity that recognizes we need good news. Every other religion tries to find a way to God. Every other philosophy tries to find the good life, but why can't they? What's so special about biblical Christianity? What's special about biblical Christianity is that any other so-called solution merely adds to the burden we have, because the burden we have is sin.

When we are trying to find God through our own efforts, sin keeps dragging us down. It forces us to feel more and more like a failure because we're sliding back. It's as if you were trying to go up a steep driveway. That's difficult enough in Houston. Let me tell you what it's like in Buffalo in January when it's iced over. You're fortunate if you don't go backward all the time. You can't make any headway up because you can't get any traction. You can't go any way you want to go because there is no ability you have to battle the ice.

This is what our lives are like with sin. We battle against sin, but we cannot conquer sin in ourselves. It merely begets more and more sin. Are you weary and tired this morning of trying to find peace? The gospel comes to us and says we must put aside all other ways of trying to find God. We must put aside all other ways of trying to find the good life, because the gospel is good news for you and me first and foremost as it tells us that God is there.

Now think about this for a moment. You are not left alone on your own to try to figure life out, to try to figure out what it is you should do to have the good life or to get to the Lord. We know who the Lord is from Scripture. We know what he loves. We know what he demands. We know what his character is like. The good news of the gospel is that God is there and he is not silent.

Think about it this way. Have you ever tried either to yourself watch or to watch with someone who doesn't know something as simple as baseball? Have you ever done that when you don't know the rules? You sit there and you look and you say, "Um, why does he keep throwing the ball, and why does the other guy keep throwing the ball back to him? And why does the guy get to run around when the ball goes over the fence? Isn't he in trouble because he lost the ball? And why do they switch when they switch? What are they doing? And how come that guy just runs but somebody else doesn't run? I don't understand this at all."

Don't even get me started on what a balk is or the infield fly rule. I mean, come on, trying to explain this, and that is baseball. Now imagine you were left on your own to figure out life, what life means, what the purpose of life is, how to succeed in life. The gospel tells us we don't have to because God is there and he speaks to us. Because of that, we can have hope. The good news of the gospel is that there is meaning to life. This sounds so basic, yet it is so crucial, especially for the young people here today, the teens.

You are living in a time in which it seems that society is trying as hard as it can to tell you your life has no value, that you can't make a difference, that it's purposeless, that we're all just a collection of random atoms floating around, that there is no purpose to life at all; you may as well just give up. Well, the gospel tells us there *is* a purpose to life. There *is* a meaning to life. There is accountability before an eternal and holy God.

There is a right and there is a wrong, and this helps us to understand our place in the universe, our actions, and the actions of others. Outside of the gospel, life is meaningless. The gospel is the good news that God has reached out to us to save us. It's not just that God is there. God has bridged the gap that exists between sinful man and himself. He doesn't wait for us to solve the bad news. He's not waiting for you to wash your face, to clean up, to put on the right clothes, to clean up your language, to do the right thing all the time, and then maybe he will consider a relationship with you. No. In Jesus Christ, God comes to us.

Jesus bridges that gap. He does that at the cost of his own blood. Upon the cross he satisfied all of the demands of the law for each and every one who believes upon him. It doesn't matter in this sense what you have done, no matter how big your sin is. "But, Pastor, I've robbed a bank. But, Pastor, I've killed someone. But, Pastor..." No. Are you trying to tell me you've done something greater than God himself sacrificing himself?

Jesus' death is of infinite worth. No matter what you have done he can wipe away your sin, wipe away your guilt. If that isn't good news, you're not listening. The gospel is good news, but it's also *God's* good news. The gospel is God's good news because it comes from God. That is what is so good about the gospel. Whenever

we are at our worst, God finds us. Every other religion requires man to stumble around to find God, hoping to do the right thing.

This is the definition of Islam. A well-observant Muslim can never have any assurance that he pleases Allah, because Allah is not involved in his life. Allah doesn't speak to him. He does not lay out what is required. The observant Muslim just hopes he does enough to avoid the wrath of Allah. There is no assurance at all. This is symptomatic of all world religions. People merely hope they've done enough.

This is what New Age philosophy is all about. It is that people try to do as best as they can to get to the next level and eventually to get to God. It's this kind of New Age, Eastern religion... The best way I can think to describe it is it's like a giant, life-size video game. You know how that works. Right, young people? You play the game. You get to a certain point. You fail. What do you do? You go back to the beginning. You start again. You try to get farther.

Sometimes you play the game better than other times so you get to start farther along the path. Sometimes you don't play it so well and you have to go backward, but it's all about treading that path over and over and over again. That's not good news; that's a cycle of hopelessness. The gospel never says, "Do." It always says, "God has done."

The Gospel is God's Good News

The gospel is God's gospel. God has designed it. We don't need to wonder if we've done enough, because God has laid out exactly what the gospel is. Paul calls it the *gospel of God*. This is what grammarians call a *subjective genitive*. That is, God is the author and possessor of the gospel. It's not just that the gospel is *about* God, an *objective genitive*. No, it is God's possession. He owns it.

God knows exactly what you need. He knows exactly what separates you from him, and he has designed the gospel perfectly to resolve that issue. When speaking about the work of our Lord Jesus Christ, theologians use a phrase called the *consequent absolute necessity of the gospel*. That's a pretty big mouthful. Let's see if we can understand what that means.

What that means is that God was not required to save anyone, but once he had determined to save anyone he was bound by himself to do whatever was necessary to bring about that salvation, even if the only thing that would bring it about would be the death of his Son. That's God's view of the gospel, because he has determined to save. He has bound himself to an absolute necessity. It is consequent to his design, but he will not steer away from it.

God does not get halfway into the gospel project and say, "You know, I really wish I hadn't have taken this on." Do you do that? I do that with about every repair project in my house. Sometimes I do that about 10

seconds in, sometimes about 10 minutes in. I throw up my hands and say, "Deb, take care of this. I don't want any more part of this."

God doesn't do that. Sometimes I think we're afraid that's what God will do, that he doesn't realize how bad we are, how much of a mess we are, how much of a project we are, and once he sees he's going to throw up his hands and say, "This is beyond me." God already knows you at your very worst. He knows how bad you are more than *you* do. Your own heart can deceive you. It can't deceive God.

God owns this gospel, and he is the one who originated it. Having designed it, God is the one who brings it about. He reaches out to us. Paul puts it this way in Romans 5: "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." That's the good news of the gospel. God already knows everything about you. He knows what he's getting into, and he *will* accomplish his purpose, because God owns this gospel.

It is *his* good news, and that should give us great confidence and assurance, because *he* is the one making sure it succeeds, not you. Your life depends upon the work of the Lord, not yourself. The gospel is God's gospel because it comes *from* him, but it is also his gospel because it is spread *by* him. Paul describes this for us in the first few verses of Romans. He tells us he is on a mission from God.

Paul is very aware of what it means to spread the gospel and to need the gospel. One short distillation of the gospel goes something like this: It is one beggar telling another beggar where he found bread. Paul is the perfect example of this. He had tried everything on his own, and all it brought him was misery and hatred, but now, as he writes to us and to the Romans, he is trusting God and letting God lead him. He tells us he is a servant of Christ Jesus.

Now I want you to stop and think about this. When you write to someone or introduce yourself to someone, how do you do it? If you're not sure, think about your résumé. What do you do on your résumé? You put forth on that your best foot. You actually push up against the boundaries of falsehood to make sure you put yourself in the best possible light.

We might have expected Paul to begin, "Paul, a planter of dozens of churches. Paul, a writer of most of the New Testament. Paul, a missionary who braved shipwreck and stoning and escaped from a city." Paul has a pretty good résumé, doesn't he? But how does Paul start this letter? He says, "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus." This is a perfectly appropriate translation, but I think sometimes in Bible translations we try to blunt a bit of the uncouth force of words.

This word actually means slave. We don't like the idea of slavery, and well we shouldn't in the world, because no man should ever own another man. But Jesus is not a man. Jesus is the God-man, so Paul is proud to

declare that Jesus owns him. Think about that. He's no longer his own man. He is the slave of Jesus. Paul glories in that. That's his leading description. He is a servant, a slave of Christ Jesus.

He then goes on to tell us he is called to be an apostle. Now what does this mean? I think sometimes the word *apostle* can be confusing, especially because as we read Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John we see the group of men who are around Jesus are sometimes called *disciples*, and then at other times they're called the *apostles*, and we wonder whether an apostle is the same thing as a disciple, someone who learns.

Well, it just so happens that that group of men were both disciples and apostles, but there is a very important difference. The word *apostle* means one who is sent out by God, specifically by Jesus Christ, to take his message to the world. What this means is Paul is very aware that it is his task given by God. God has called him to this task to spread the gospel. It's who he is. He's an apostle.

If we were not to use a Bible word, Paul might say, "Paul, the guy God sent out to tell other people about Jesus." *Apostle* is a little bit shorter, but you get the drift. This must affect the way we view this book of Romans. It is not good human teaching. It is not good advice to us. It is the very Word of God brought to us by God himself.

Thirdly, Paul says he is set apart for the gospel of God. Now what does it mean for Paul to be set apart? Paul has always lived his life set apart. Before he met Jesus, Paul was set apart from other people. He didn't want to talk to certain people. He didn't want to eat with certain people. As a matter of fact, Paul was so set apart that if he were walking down the street and someone came down the same side of the street he would deliberately cross over to get away from them, to be separate from them.

But now Paul is not set apart *from* something. Look at what the preposition is. Prepositions in the Bible are very important. He is set apart *to* the gospel, *for* the gospel. That preposition has purpose built into it. Again, if we were to expand on the translation we would say he is set apart for the purpose of working with and bringing about the gospel. Paul is set apart for a purpose. The gospel has changed his life, and now he has to tell others about it, because this is what the gospel does.

Have you ever had the occasion to have a conversation at length with someone who owned the opposite kind of smartphone that you own? I don't care if you're an iPhone user or an Android user, but someone on the other side of the fence, as it were. Have you ever had that conversation in which someone insists their phone is the best phone and you should have their phone and has to then tell you about all of the things about their phone that are great?

But they don't stop there, do they? They have to tell you everything about *your* phone that's bad and why you shouldn't like your phone and you should have *their* phone. They become (we even talk about it) evangelists for iOS or Android. They can't help it. They love their phone so much. Beloved, it's a phone. Right? If you

drop it you break it. Sometimes you drop it in the toilet and it gets wet and you have to get a new one. Sometimes it freezes up on you. As a matter of fact, you can't wait to get the newer, best phone.

Think about what the gospel means to you. How can you not tell others about the gospel? How can you not tell them about what God and Jesus Christ has done for you and why you are so much the better for it, not because of who you are but because of who Jesus is, and because of that they can be better too, and you're sure of it even if you don't know them because you know Jesus, and Jesus can work with any kind of raw material. That's part of the gospel. It comes to us, and God spreads it through us. That is the work of the Lord. This is God's gospel.

The Gospel is Sure Good News

So how do I know the gospel is for *me*? After all, there are all sorts of things I want or need that I can't have. It's like when you go out to a restaurant and you're looking over the menu and can't decide what to eat until the waiter starts tapping his foot, and the people in your party are like, "Come on, let's go." Finally, you choose something off the menu, and it comes. The only problem is someone in your party or maybe the table right next to you gets something else, and you say, "Oh, I should have ordered *that*. Can I have that instead?" You know what the answer is. "No." Because it's not for *you*. It's for *them*.

I think sometimes we are afraid the gospel is like that. We'll see the gospel and go, "Oh, I shouldn't have ordered the law and works. I should have ordered the gospel, but it's not for me now." That's not how the gospel works. It can't be good news if I can't get it. As a matter of fact, it becomes the worst news because of the frustration of wanting it and not being able to have it. The gospel is good news. It is for everyone.

The gospel is not just something out *there*. It's not just something God floats as a trial balloon. "Well, see if you like it. Take it or leave it. I'm unconcerned about whether you grab onto it or not." No, the gospel is God's gospel. It is his purpose, so he promises it to us. Paul says it's "the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand." This word *promise* is a very interesting word.

You remember how I said the word for gospel is *good* and *news* stuck together? The root of the word *promise* is also *news* except it has a preposition stuck onto it that means to. It's the news that comes *to* you. It's a promise. It's something you can get and you can rely on. I find it fascinating that the word for *promise* and the word for *gospel* are so similar, because they go together.

The gospel is God's promise, Paul tells us, but the gospel is not just its substance, because it is the sure bringing of this good news to us. Paul says he proclaims Jesus because Jesus is the fulfillment of all of God's promises. He puts it this way: "For all the promises of God find their Yes in [Jesus]." You don't need to wonder if the gospel is for you.

Over and over again, the Bible tells us we have this promise. Twenty-two times in the New Testament alone we are told, "Whoever believes..." "Whoever believes will not be condemned. Whoever believes will be saved. Whoever believes will have eternal life. Whoever believes will not be put to shame." You are in the *whoever*. The gospel is for everyone.

Sometimes we get caught up wondering if we've done enough to deserve the gospel. This happened to a man in the ministry of the famous preacher Charles Spurgeon. He kept coming to Pastor Spurgeon over and over again and saying, "Well, I don't know if the gospel is for me. How can I know? What can I do? What does it mean to have the gospel?" Spurgeon looked right at him and said, "Do you want to know if the gospel is for you?"

"Well, of course I do."

"Trust Jesus. Then you know it's for you."

The gospel is for whoever believes, so if you believe on Jesus Christ you know for a fact the gospel is for you. You don't need to try to work up other things. You don't need to ask other people. If you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, the gospel is for you. I don't care where you're from, what language you speak, how many children you have, if you're married or unmarried, what kind of job you do, what kind of house you live in. If you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, the gospel is for you. It is universal in its scope.

The gospel is sure good news because it comes from God's promise, but it is also announced in the Bible, because the good news is not entirely new. There is a sense in which as Paul comes to us there is an exciting, fresh, new aspect of hope in the gospel, but it is not new. The promise has always been God's way. Paul actually does this again with this word for *promise*. It's *news* with the preposition *to* stuck on it, and he sticks another preposition on it.

Paul likes making up words sometimes to make his point. The preposition he sticks on it is *beforehand*. It's a promise God has given to us, and he has given it beforehand. What that means for you and me is we can look and see others who relied on the promise and received the promise, and we can say we have the same surety. The promise of the gospel that comes to you is the same promise that came to Abraham. It's the same promise that caused him to leave the land of his forefathers, to obey God and be ready to sacrifice his son, to establish his family as a nation.

The promise you have is the same promise Moses had in the book of Exodus. When he stood before the most powerful ruler in the world and said, "'Let my people go,' says the Lord," he was not afraid, because he had the promise of God. It's the same promise God gave to David. We see it in the Psalms. It's the same promise Isaiah, Jeremiah, and all of the prophets spoke about. This is the promise God has given beforehand. It is the good news.

If you don't believe me, believe Jesus. On the road to Emmaus, as men were walking with him, he came to them and said, "'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself."

Jesus tells us this promise is the same promise of God throughout all of history. We don't need to look for another way. It points us to the importance of the Bible. Your Bible is important not because it has some kind of magic property. Your Bible is important because in there you find the promise of God to you of salvation in Jesus. That's why you hold on to your Bible: it tells you about Jesus.

John Wesley put it this way in the introduction to his sermons: "I want to know one thing: the way to heaven, how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way; for this very end he came from heaven. He [has] written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me."

This is the summary of Romans. It is also the most important thing you must know. The gospel is good news for our weary souls. It is God reaching out to you in the person and work of Jesus, God promising you that Jesus is yours and you are Jesus'. It is a promise written eternally in the Word of God that can never change. Will you believe it this morning? Will you find hope in it? Jesus is yours. Whoever believes.