

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, September 27, 2015**

**JOURNEY ON THE ROMANS ROAD**

**Romans 1:1-7**

I am so glad – finally – to be standing before you to preach God’s Word once again. I have been looking forward to this day for quite some time. My previous attempts to preach at the beginning of August, following Pastor David’s broken leg, came too soon after my knee replacement surgery in July. Not only was I dealing with the pain and trauma to my body from the knee replacement itself, but the pain medication I was taking was really messing with me in other ways, including causing uncontrollable weeping. The turning point for me came sometime between six and eight weeks after my knee replacement when the pain medication was finally out of my system.

It was the grace of God that enabled Mary Sue and me to make it through that time. And it is by His grace that we have made it this far. I have not completely recovered from all the effects of the surgery yet. It has been not quite 12 weeks since I got my new knee. But I am riding a stationary bike, mowing the lawn, going for walks, and doing great. Tomorrow I will be discharged from outpatient physical therapy. For all this, and for all His mercies to me, I say: “All thanks and praise to the Lord!” As it says in Psalm 126:3:

The Lord has done great things for us,  
and we are filled with joy.

I am grateful to Pastor David for his faithful preaching of God’s Word even as he has dealt with his own broken leg. And to Youth Director Mike for his message to us from God’s Word on August 30. And to Helen Franssell, who not only preached on short notice on August 16 but has graciously served as a worship leader on so many Sundays when either David or I were not able to do so. We are abundantly, richly blessed to have her in our church family.

\* \* \* \* \*

**PAUL’S MAGNUM OPUS**

Now today I want to invite you to embark with me on a journey on the “Romans road.” I don’t mean an actual journey to Rome, of course, as interesting as that may sound to many of us who have never been there. Nor am I using the term “Romans road” in a metaphorical sense, as some might use the expression “Roman road” to refer to a spiritual pilgrimage leading them to embrace Roman Catholicism. Nor do I mean the “Romans road” gospel presentation that many of you may know and may have shared with others, though we will likely encounter it along the way in this journey. This journey on the Romans road is meant to be a study of the message of Paul’s Letter to the Romans, which John Piper has called “the greatest letter ever written” ([www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org), April 26, 1998 sermon).

Piper is not alone in his high regard for Romans. Chuck Swindoll calls Romans the first systematic theology of the Christian faith (*Insights on Romans*, 19). Philip Melancthon, Martin Luther's friend and fellow Reformer, referred to Romans as "a compendium of Christian doctrine" (Quoted in John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 31). It is the most complete expression of Paul's theology in the New Testament. John Stott described Romans as "a kind of Christian manifesto ... a timeless manifesto of freedom" – spiritual freedom, freedom from the enslaving power of sin and guilt – through faith in Jesus Christ. It is, he says, "the fullest, plainest, and grandest statement of the gospel in the New Testament" (Stott, 19).

While I Corinthians 13 is rightly regarded as Paul's magnum opus on *agape* love, the Letter to the Romans is unquestionably Paul's magnum opus in its proclamation and explanation of God's gracious plan of salvation and its implication for both Christian faith and life. John Calvin said of Romans: "... (I)f we have gained a true understanding of this Epistle, we have an open door to all the most profound treasures of Scripture" (Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, 5).

### **THE MESSAGE OF ROMANS**

The main theme of the letter is stated in Romans 1:16-17, where Paul says: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, to the Jew first and then to the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'"

We will see in coming weeks the richness in meaning and the life-altering implications of the gospel message in Paul's "devastating exposure of universal human sin and guilt" (Stott, 10) in Romans 1:18-3:20 – what I call "the bad news of the gospel" – followed by the apostle's magnificent announcement of God's provision of salvation by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ in 3:21-8:39, which is in turn followed by Paul's unfolding of the doctrine of God's sovereignty in salvation expressed in His (God's) plan for the Jews and the Gentiles in chapters 9-11. In chapters 12-15, Paul turns from theology to life, from Christian doctrine to Christian living in the light of the gospel. Paul then concludes by writing of his desire and plan to visit Rome (15:23-33) and words of greeting to leaders and members of the church in Rome (chapter 16). The righteousness of God, the wrath of God, the grace of God, the peace of God, the love of God, the sovereign plan of God, and the will of God – it is all here in the Letter to the Romans.

Paul wrote the Letter to the Romans from Corinth, during his third missionary journey, in AD 57 or 58. He had completed his missionary work in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, and now his heart was set on visiting Rome and then traveling on to Spain to preach the gospel there. Before doing so, however, one unfinished item of business remained: to go to Jerusalem with the offering he had collected from the believers in Achaia and Macedonia to assist the poverty-stricken Christians in and around Jerusalem.

## **I'VE NEVER ... BUT I'D REALLY LIKE TO**

On our church family retreat a couple weeks ago, we played a game called “I’ve never ... but I’d really like to ...” We broke into groups and went around our circle, each of us sharing something we have never done and would like to do, or some place we have never visited but would very much like to visit. I think someone in our group said: “I’ve never gone bungee-jumping, but I’d really like to.” Someone else: “I’ve never been to the Grand Canyon, but I’d really like to see it.” If Paul had been in our circle, do you know what he would probably have said? This: “I’ve never been to Rome, but I really want to go there.” Not only that. I think he would also have said: “I’ve never been to Spain, but it is the passion and ambition of my heart to preach the gospel there where it has not yet been proclaimed. And I hope that Rome will be the launching point and the support base for my mission to Spain.” Paul understood how strategic Rome could and would be for the westward spread of the gospel.

Did Paul ever make it to Spain? We don’t know. That’s a question we’ll come back to later in our study of Romans. We do know that he made it to Rome, though not exactly in the way he might have hoped. If you know Paul’s story, you know what I mean.

With this goal in mind, Paul wrote this lengthy epistle to the church at Rome, which was made up of both Jewish and Gentile Christians. Besides wanting to enlist the support of the church in Rome for his proposed mission to Spain, Paul also wrote this letter to make the gospel and its implications clear to the Romans, so that the Jewish and Gentile believers would be united in the gospel he preached and the gospel they believed.

Just how and when the gospel first came to Rome, we don’t know. The answer may be found in Acts 2, when the Holy Spirit came in power upon the followers of Christ in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. Among those who witnessed the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and who heard Peter’s Pentecost sermon that day were visitors from Rome, who may have then returned to Rome and shared the gospel message with others. What we know for certain is that Paul himself was not the founder of the church in Rome. (Nor, apart from his Pentecost sermon, is there any evidence in the New Testament to support the belief held by Roman Catholics that Peter founded the church in Rome.)

I want you to notice, in Paul’s greeting and introduction in the opening verses of the letter, what Paul says about himself, about the gospel, and about the Christians in Rome to whom he is writing.

## **WHAT PAUL SAYS ABOUT HIMSELF**

He begins in verse 1 by introducing himself, as was the customary format in his day. He identifies himself, first of all, as “a servant of Christ Jesus.” The word translated “servant” in both the NIV and the ESV is the word *doulos*, which can be properly translated as “bond-servant” or “slave.” Slavery in the Greco-Roman world of the 1<sup>st</sup> century was not the same as slavery in America in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Slavery in the 1<sup>st</sup> century was not based on race. Nor, in the vast majority of cases, were people slaves for life. Nevertheless, being an indentured servant or *doulos* in the Roman world was no picnic. For Paul, being a

*doulos* of Christ meant that he was “completely at his Master’s disposal” (F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 67). In the words of *The Message*, Paul was “a devoted slave of Jesus Christ” (Romans 1:1). You see, Paul understood that he *belonged* to Jesus. He had been “bought with a price” and he was no longer his own (I Corinthians 6:19-20).

Which is true of you and me as well, if Jesus is truly Savior and Lord of our lives. We are not our own.

Out of love and gratitude to the Lord Jesus for what He had done for him, Paul had dedicated the remainder of his life to be a *doulos*, a fully-devoted bond-servant of Christ. There was no status in Roman society lower than that of a *doulos*. As Paul saw it, though, there was no status higher than to be a *doulos* of Christ.

Next, Paul says, he was “called to be an apostle.” The word “apostle” (*apostolos* in Greek) means “one who is sent on a mission” with authority from the one doing the sending. Paul, having received his commission directly from the Lord Jesus on the Road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-9), was a missionary envoy and messenger of Christ Himself who spoke and acted on Christ’s behalf. For this purpose, Paul goes on to say (still in verse 1) that he was “set apart for the gospel of God.” The same word translated here as “set apart” (*asphorismenos*) is used in Acts 13:2, where the Holy Spirit told the leaders of the church at Antioch to “set apart ... Barnabas and (Paul)” for the mission to which the Lord had called them. Paul was deeply conscious of the fact that he had been set apart by God to proclaim “the gospel of God,” the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ which is the overarching theme of the Letter to the Romans and the legacy of Paul’s life and witness. He had been and would remain to the end of his life an energetic and faithful messenger of the gospel.

### **WHAT PAUL SAYS ABOUT THE GOSPEL**

Having, in effect, presented his credentials to the Romans, Paul turns in verses 2 and following to the gospel itself. Notice what he says. He says, first of all, that the gospel message is not new. It is not something made up by Paul or the other apostles or the church in the New Testament. He has already said it is “the gospel of God” (1:1). It came from God. God Himself is the author of the gospel. It is *God’s* good news for a lost and broken world. This gospel, Paul says, was “promised beforehand through (God’s) prophets in the Holy Scriptures” (1:2). It goes as far back as Genesis 3:15, where God promises that the seed or offspring of the woman – Jesus the Messiah – would “crush the head” of the serpent, defeating Satan, a promise fulfilled in Christ’s atoning death and resurrection from the dead. The entire Old Testament, we might say, is pregnant with the gospel message. The gospel is easier to detect in some parts of the Old Testament than others, but it is there. And looking at the big picture, it becomes evident that the Old Testament – from Adam and Eve to Abraham and Sarah to Moses and David and all the prophets from Elijah to Malachi – is “expecting” a child in fulfillment of God’s redeeming promises. In the Old Testament, the gospel is *in utero* (Mike Bullmore, [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com)).

Next, we see in verse 3 that the gospel is *about* God’s Son. Jesus is the subject and substance, the content and center of the gospel. He is the fulfillment of God’s promise to send a Savior. From beginning to end, the gospel is about Jesus and what He did for us.

What does Paul say here about Jesus? He establishes the humanness and the royal pedigree of Jesus by telling us Jesus was a descendant of David (1:3), a necessary qualification for the promised Messianic King. Then he speaks of the deity of Christ, His identity as the Son of God, as demonstrated by His power over death itself in His resurrection from the dead (1:4). Therefore, Paul says at the end of verse 4, He is “Jesus Christ our Lord.” Jesus is not only Lord, He is *our* Lord. And He is not only *our* Lord, He is *the* Lord, the one true Lord and King.

This good news of God’s saving grace shown to us in the person and work of Jesus our Lord is meant, Paul says, for Gentiles as well as Jews. Look at verse 5. Paul is on a mission from God “to call people from among the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith” (1:5). The gospel is for everyone. It is for me. It is for you. It is for the people you love. It is for people you find it impossible to love. It is for Jews and Muslims, for atheists and agnostics, for Americans and Iranians, for Catholics and Protestants. There is no one who does not need the gospel.

This phrase in verse 5, “the obedience that comes from faith,” means that saving faith in Christ – and Paul is crystal clear that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone – promotes and produces a life of God-honoring obedience. Faithful obedience to God is the fruit of faith and is the evidence that our faith is the real thing. You aren’t saved by your obedience to God or your good works. No one is. But saving faith affects how you live, as you allow the Holy Spirit to do His transforming, sanctifying work in you.

### **WHAT PAUL SAYS ABOUT THE ROMANS**

Lastly, notice very briefly what Paul says about the Romans in verses 6 and 7. Four things:

- 1) They are “called to belong to Jesus Christ” (1:6).
- 2) They are “loved by God” as His dear children (1:7a).
- 3) They are “called to be saints” (1:7a).
- 4) They are the recipients of God’s grace and peace (1:7b).

All these things that were true of the followers of the Lord Jesus in Rome are true of the followers of Jesus today. Including us right here in Kingstowne, Virginia. They are true of you and me.

You are called *personally* to belong to Jesus as a believer and follower or disciple of His in the world today. You are loved by God *personally*. And that will never change. You are called to be saints – which is not necessarily what you think. We’ll come back to this next week. And God has lovingly lavished His grace and peace upon you: the grace that comes free of charge to people like you and me who don’t deserve it and never will; and the peace – peace with God and peace in your soul – that is a gift of His grace.

So, we have begun our journey on the Romans road. I hope you will enjoy the journey and let God speak to you through His Word. May His grace and peace be upon us all as we walk with Him in the faith that produces obedience. To the glory of His name.

Lord, let it be so. Amen.