

## Based on a Promise, Called for a Purpose

### Romans 1:1-7

An atheist was walking through the woods one day, admiring the nature around him. "What majestic trees! What a powerful river! What beautiful animals!" he said to himself.

As he was walking alongside the river, he heard a rustling in the bushes behind him. Turning to look, he saw a 13-foot Kodiak brown bear beginning to charge towards him. He ran as fast as he could down the path. He looked over his shoulder and saw that the bear was rapidly closing on him. Somehow, he ran even faster, so scared that tears came to his eyes. He looked again and the bear was even closer. His heart pounding in his chest, he tried to run faster yet.

But alas, he tripped and fell to the ground. As he rolled over to pick himself up, the bear was right over him, reaching for him with its left paw and raising its right paw to strike him.

"OH MY GOD—HELP ME! ..."

Time stopped. The bear froze. The forest was silent. Even the river stopped moving ... A brilliant light shone upon the man, a thunderous voice came from all around...

"YOU DENY MY EXISTENCE FOR ALL THESE YEARS, TEACH OTHERS THAT I DON'T EXIST AND EVEN CREDIT CREATION TO SOME COSMIC ACCIDENT. DO YOU EXPECT ME TO HELP YOU OUT OF THIS PREDICAMENT? AM I TO COUNT YOU AS A BELIEVER?"

Difficult as it was, the atheist looked directly into the light and said, "It would be hypocritical to ask to be a Christian after all these years, but perhaps you could make the bear a Christian?"

"VERY WELL." Said God.

The light went out. The river ran. The sounds of the forest resumed.

... and the bear dropped down on his knees, brought both paws together, bowed his head and spoke: "Lord, thank you for this food which I am about to receive."

That story has absolutely nothing to do with today's message, but it was too good to pass up. In any case it's a good reminder that it's OK—maybe even recommended—to be very specific in our prayers...

Today we begin an exploration through Paul's letter to the Romans. It's the longest and most complicated of Paul's letters, but it's also very important for our understanding of who we are and whose we are as Christian people—as a Christian church.

Our text this morning is Romans 1:1-7.

*1Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God— 2the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures 3regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, 4and 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. 5Through 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. 6And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.*

*7To 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.*

Now Romans has a bad reputation. As books of the Bible go it has the reputation for being hard—for being too complicated—for being difficult to understand. Here's a news flash: The reputation is true. Romans is a hard book to read. It's long, which makes it hard to read in one sitting like you can with the other letters of Paul. But it's not just its length. Think about what you're trying to understand in reading this letter. This book of the Bible was written 2000 years ago by a converted Jew who was trained as a Pharisee. He was writing it to a city he hadn't visited before, and trying to convince them that something that happened in one of the backwaters of the Roman Empire could offer them salvation from a God

they were just getting to know.

Of course this letter is hard to read. But still, everyone has their favorite Romans verse, right?

Romans 1:16

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

Romans 5:8

But God demonstrated his own love for us in this: While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 8:28

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Romans 8:38-39

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 12:1-2

Therefore I urge you, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.

Everyone has their favorite passage from Romans. I want to say very clearly as we get started here that these favorite passages, when you take them individually, can get in the way of understanding what this letter is all about.

The point of the letter is in our text, but it's also rooted in the covenant promises that God made (and kept) to the Jewish people. (See Genesis 12:1-3 here)

Let's put the letter into context.

The Apostle Paul is one of the central figures of the early church. He was born into the Jewish faith and trained as a Pharisee. We think of the Pharisees as the villains in most of the stories about Jesus in the gospels, but that's not completely fair. The Pharisees were scholars whose job it was to make sure that people of faith followed the Hebrew laws to the very letter. They believed—they were people of deep faith who took their responsibility very seriously. But that's what got them on the bad side of Jesus—too much law and not enough heart.

Paul, who starts out as Saul from a place called Tarsus, trained under a famous Pharisee scholar named Gamaliel, which is the equivalent of getting an Ivy League PhD in Jewish law. Saul calls himself a 'Hebrew of Hebrews', and even leads some of the early persecution of the Christian church. But that's only the beginning of his story. Saul meets Jesus in a miraculous vision on his way to Damascus. Jesus changes his name to Paul, and calls him to be the one who shares the gospel of Jesus Christ with the world.

Most of Paul's letters were written within 20 or 30 years after Jesus' earthly ministry. Paul is brilliant, blunt, abrasive, tender, and fearless—we'll see all of those qualities as we move through his letter to the Romans.

Paul's letter was written to the new Christian church in Rome. It was mostly Gentile but it had a strong core of Jewish converts. There were 50,000 Jews in Rome in the 1st century, and many of them converted to the Christian faith. Many of the early Christian churches in Rome were actually converted synagogues, so there was a deep sense of connection between the Jewish and Gentile members of the Roman church.

This letter was written in the year 55AD—fairly early in the history of Christianity. Remember that the Christian movement was still being persecuted at this point, and it would get worse as the church grew.

It makes sense then that the point of the letter would have something to do with both Jews and Gentiles, since both were involved in the Roman church.

And so what was the point of Paul's letter to the Romans?

Romans was written to convince one group of people that God could be trusted because of his faithfulness to another group of people.

Let me say that another way:

The letter to the Romans was written to convince the Gentile Christians in Rome that God could be trusted because he kept his promises to his Jewish covenant people. It was also a reminder to the Jewish people that they hadn't left their old faith behind for a new one, but that Christ was the completion of the faith they'd held all along.

Keep that in mind not only today but also through this entire series. Paul is making a case—he's making an argument to the most influential city in the world—and it centers on God's faithfulness to his promises to the Jewish people.

Let's look at our text.

Notice in the second verse that Paul refers to the 'gospel promised beforehand through the prophets and Holy Scriptures.' That's a clear indication that we're supposed to see the life and ministry of Jesus in light of the prophecies of the Old Testament. Just a point of logical detail here, but the 'Holy Scripture' Paul mentions here is the Hebrew Bible—the Old Testament—since he's writing before the New Testament is circulating. The real point, though, is that the gospel—the good news of Jesus Christ—is rooted in the promises of the Jewish tradition.

We should also pay attention to the central role of the resurrection in Paul's argument. It's the resurrection of Jesus that proves God is faithful to his promise to bless everyone, Jew and Gentile and everyone in between. It's the resurrection that Paul uses as proof that God can be trusted at his word.

All of this is built on a foundation of God's grace: 'Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from everywhere to faith.' Grace is central to our understanding of Paul's letter to the Romans.

Grace takes on all kinds of different shapes. This past week there was a story about a guy who had been a season ticket holder with the Philadelphia Phillies

(that's an American baseball team, by the way) for years, but he'd never caught a foul ball. The other night a ball came his way and he made a great catch. The whole thing was caught on one of the TV cameras and the whole stadium was watching him. He celebrated with his friends and the fans around him, then gave the ball to his 3-year-old daughter. She smiled and threw the ball back onto the field.

The stadium went silent for a moment, and then the dad scooped up his daughter and gave her a huge hug. The stadium went crazy—the dad ended up on morning talk shows and becoming a local celebrity. When he was asked why he reacted the way he did, he said: "I didn't want her to feel bad—I wanted her to know she was more important than the ball."

Someday that little girl will realize what she did that day, but what she'll really remember is that her father loved her anyway.

I posted that story on my Facebook page this past week, and one of Julie's old friends commented that 'that's an example of parenting as it should be.'

She's right. The dad in that story is an example of parenting with grace, and that's the point Paul is making about God here. Through Christ we're given the gift of grace from God himself, no matter what we've done, and it's that grace that empowers us and gives us strength for the journey.

It's through Christ that we get reminded that no matter what we've done, our father loves us anyway.

What does all of this mean for us?

Paul's letter to the Romans, with all its theology and teaching and challenge and history—this letter is as much to us in this time and place as it was to the 1st-century Romans. The case that Paul was making to the Romans is the same case we all need to hear and share right now if we're going to grow into the people he made us to be in the first place.

There are two main points for us to remember as we read this letter and as we

seek to be Christ's disciples in the world.

First, our trust in God is based on a promise. We believe and have hope because God has shown us over and over again that he can be trusted—that he'll keep his word—that in the end he'll "make all things new." None of that means our lives are guaranteed to be rosy, by the way. God's faithfulness doesn't always equal an easy life for us. But the point of the resurrection—the reason Jesus Christ was risen from the dead was to prove that the reign of God extended even to the things we fear the most—that God's Kingdom ruled over all people and all places and everything else, even death.

God has been and will be faithful, but that's not the end of the story.

The second point for us to remember is this: In response to God's faithfulness to his promises, we have been called for a purpose. Paul identifies himself in our text as a 'servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God.'

The same is true about us. Christ calls each one of us to serve him in some way—somehow each of us has some gift or talent to share with the whole body of Christ to make us whole—to make us better. We're called to be apostles wherever we are—ambassadors of the message that God is faithful, that he keeps his promises, and that he loves all of his creation. Paul the apostle had to start the church. The call on us is to grow it and extend it to the ends of the earth.

Finally, we're set apart for the gospel of God—set apart to be agents of the Good News in every situation. Now that's a project that really doesn't have an end to it—we never really accomplish it or complete it. It doesn't have an end, but it needs to have a beginning and a middle. To be set apart is to hear the call to live differently—to love and earn and spend and serve in a new way because of what Christ has done for us.

That's the point of Paul's letter to the Romans. Our faith in Jesus Christ is based on the promise that God is who he says he is, and that he'll do what he said he would do. Because of that we're called to a purpose: to share that good news with anyone who will listen.

This letter is to the Roman church, but we're going to see that it could just as easily be addressed to the churches in London. Hear the last verse of our text in a new way:

"To all in London who are loved by God and called to be saints. Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Amen.

Because the resurrection is so central to this letter, and because we suddenly like to sing our hymns out of season, let's stand and sing together one of the great Easter hymns—"Jesus Christ is Risen Today."