

Romans 1:1-7 – The Gospel of Paul ¹

Before the Lesson: Make copies of the handout, “History as Good News.”

Fellowship question: (Use *one* of these to break the ice, to begin some discussion, and to lead into the study):

When I hear the word “gospel” I think of... (one of the first four books of the New Testament, a type of music, evangelistic preaching, stories about Jesus, etc.)

My favorite part of the Bible’s Christmas story is...

Information

The first four books of the New Testament are all titled, “The Gospel of...” In each of these gospels, there are stories about Jesus. Only Matthew and Luke have the infancy stories of Jesus. It is from these gospels that we learn of angelic visitations, miracles, shepherds, the birth in Bethlehem, and the visit of the Magi. Mark skips all these stories and begins with John the Baptist’s preaching and his baptism of Jesus when Jesus was about thirty years old.

The Gospel of John also skips over the infancy stories of Jesus. Many scholars believe that John’s was the last gospel written and that John was very familiar with the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John begins Jesus’ story before his birth, before history began - before the Creation began, even!

Although they follow the gospels in our ordering of the New Testament, Paul’s writings were written before the gospels. His letter to the Romans was written decades before John’s gospel, for example.

“Paul wrote Romans after an extensive period of ministry to Gentiles in the eastern part of the Mediterranean... We can identify Paul’s location from his commendation of his delegate Phoebe, who is a ‘deacon/servant’ of the church (16:1)... It is during the three-month stay in Corinth (Acts 20:1-5), as he reflected on his immediate journey to Jerusalem and a future expedition to Spain, that he turned his mind to the Romans and dispatched Phoebe with his communication to them..... We can date Romans around AD 56/57.”²

¹ This lesson is copyrighted by Dr. Rick Jordan, Great Bible Teachers, Inc, 2024. More lessons may be found at greatbibleteachers.com.

² Michael F. Bird, *Romans*, The Story of God Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2016), 4,5.

Paul begins his letter with a prescript. In our day, a letter ends with the name of the author. In Paul's day, the letter began with the author's name, the name of the recipient(s), and a salutation.

“All of Paul's letters expand on the standard conventions of Greek letter prescripts, but Romans 1:1-7 – a single sentence in Greek – constitutes the most elaborate prescript found in any NT letter.”³

- Have a class member read this sentence, Romans 1:1-7.

That's quite a sentence! It is odd because of its length, but also odd because of its depth. Besides introducing himself, Paul introduces the Gospel of Paul. We do not have an infancy story - a Christmas story, if you will - but we do have a history lesson.

Jesus was a historical figure. In the Western world, we still date events by time before and after the life of Jesus. Because calendars have changed over the millennia, this gives us some odd figures, such as the best guess that Jesus was born in about 6 BC.⁴ But the point is still evident that when Jesus came, a new era began.

Paul was not concerned with the calendar, but he was intrigued by time and how God has worked through time to reconcile the world to God. The letter to the Romans is the fruit of many years of pondering this salvation history. The letter was the fruit of Paul's initial training as a Pharisee, his experience as a radical convert to the “Jesus as Messiah” clan, and his many experiences as a missionary to non-Jews.

“The first thing to notice is that Romans is a letter from Paul, period....Omission of co-senders in the letter to Rome may very well be intended to make clear that in this letter we confront what Paul intended to be a statement of his own understanding of the gospel of Christ...Here is the theology for which Paul is willing to take sole responsibility.”⁵

But Paul was also shaped by his experiences such as arguing with pagans, trying to convert kings and peasants, and living with persons of faith who had other ideas, different backgrounds, and even more mature faith than he had. As President Truman proclaimed, “the buck stops here.” Paul says that this letter is an explanation of “my gospel” (2:16; 16:25). But others were in the room.

³ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Romans: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2024), 21.

⁴ It is possible and fun to go deep into a rabbit hole with this topic, but the BC/AD/CE debate is not our topic for the day, so I give it only a passing glance in our lesson.

⁵ Paul Achtemeier, *Romans*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1985), 29.

“Paul does not write alone. Phoebe, Timothy, Lucius, Jason, and Sosipater are with him, along with Gaius, Erastus, and Quartus (16:21-23). These individuals, along with others in Corinth, may well have played a role in shaping the letter. Given the length and complexity of this letter, Paul would have written it over a period of time. Presumably, he would have discussed its contents with those around him, probably even read sections or full drafts. This process is especially important regarding Phoebe. Before he entrusts it to Phoebe for delivery, reading, and circulation, Paul would have made sure that she understood what he wanted from the letter.”⁶

Paul’s gospel centered on Jesus, as did the four writings we know as the Gospels. Unique to Paul, however, is his 30,000-foot view from above. He saw the story of God’s salvation of the world from the failure of Adam to the founding of a new era at the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus to the final victory over evil, sin, and death. And it is all summed up in these few verses.

A new translation of the New Testament demonstrates that this passage is one sentence. It also shapes the middle verses in a pattern like a litany or a poem.

“Paul may here employ an early creedal formula, although the extent, origin, and function of the formula are by no means certain.”⁷

“This passage has generated speculation that we are here dealing with that hypothetical entity the ‘pre-Pauline formula,’ which Paul has quoted, quite possibly adapting or modifying it as he did so, in order not least to establish his credentials for an audience to whom the formula would have been familiar...The reason Paul quoted things, if he did, was that they expressed exactly what he intended to say at the time.”⁸

- Distribute the handout. Ask a class member to read Romans 1:1-7 from this new translation.

“The christology of 1:3-4 is by no means an isolated statement attached loosely to the front of the letter but not relevant to its contents. It is the careful, weighted, programmatic statement that will turn out to be Paul’s subtext throughout the whole epistle.”⁹

“Romans 1:3-4 is not simply a convenient collection of christological titles; rather, it tells a short story about the identity of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the preexistent ‘Son’ who is humanly born in the line of ‘David’ and designated as the ‘Son of God’ through the Holy Spirit, who later raised him

⁶ Gaventa, 7.

⁷ Gaventa, 26f.

⁸ N.T. Wright, *The Letter to the Romans*, *The New Interpreter’s Bible* vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 416, 417.

⁹ Wright, 417.

from the dead, and this event proleptically inaugurated the eschatological age. The one called Jesus is also the ‘Lord.’”¹⁰

“Note that the gospel is not four spiritual laws, nor a logical syllogism about reconciling God’s holiness and human sin. Instead, it is the announcement that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah of Israel and Lord of the world. To tell the gospel, then, is to tell the story of Jesus.”¹¹

As the new NT translation helped us visualize 1:1-7 as one verse and a significant portion of that sentence as a formula/poem/litany, the Bible scholar Paul Achtemeier helps us visualize Paul’s theology in the letter to the Romans. Achtemeier teaches that the apostle Paul was looking at the salvation of Creation through the lens of history.

Paul was a Jew and a professional interpreter of the scriptures. The Jewish perspective of history is illustrated in the first diagram.¹² There is an era of evil (from Adam onward) that will one day end and a new era of the Kingdom of God (which they were always anticipating and praying for.)

Paul insists that the incarnation of Jesus that led to the resurrection of Jesus was proof that the new era had already begun. (See the next diagram.)

“What Paul has done is to collapse the two ages (or *aeons*, the Greek word) into one another because of his conviction that with the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth God has already begun to inaugurate the new age, the full and visible establishment of which will occur when Jesus returns to judge all humankind.”¹³

This is good news! The word “gospel” means “good news.” It was not a word unique to Christians, but Christians co-opted it and baptized it.

“The Romans had their own ‘gospel’ about the accession of new emperors to the throne. In AD 69 [we read in Josephus’ writings], ‘When news spread of Vespasian’s accession to the throne every city celebrated the *good news* and offered sacrifices on his behalf.’ Given this linguistic background, it was inevitable that the adherents of the ‘gospel of Jesus Christ’ would come into conflict with political apparatus behind ‘the gospel of Rome’ as there can only be one Lord and one Son of God in the world. It is either the Son of David or the son of Augustus.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Bird, 22f.

¹¹ Bird, 22.

¹² These diagrams are from pages 7, 8, and 12 of Achtemeier’s Interpretation commentary,

¹³ Achtemeier, 7.

¹⁴ Bird, 21.

“While the past is important for Paul, because it was the period of the Jews as the chosen people and of Jesus as the Messiah, and while the future is important, because it is the period when history finally reaches its goal and the new age will be finally established, the present is also important, because the forces of the new age are already at work within it enabling human beings to align themselves with it or against it.”¹⁵

The final diagram reveals the pattern of Paul’s thought in Romans 1-5.

As has been said “history is HIS Story,” the story of Jesus and God’s hope for a changed, renewed, repurposed world. For Paul, history led to theology and theology led to ethics. In Romans, as in his other letters, Paul begins with theology, then moves on to how this theology should shape our daily lives. Christ coming into the world and into our lives should make a difference.

- Have a class member read Romans 12:1-2.

From these verses on, Paul teaches about a Christ-follower’s obedience to the way of Christ and “how the rubber hits the road.” But Paul doesn’t begin his letter with “Thou shalt or shalt not.” Paul begins with time and history and God’s use of both to fulfill God’s dream for the world God created.

Transformational Exercise

In our own “history” we have eras of faith. There is a BC and an AD in each of our lives. There is also a BP and we trust there will be an AP - “Before the Parousia” and “After the Parousia.”

Our lives are testimonies. I remember going to a worship service in a church that had a focused ministry to prison-released persons. During each service, there was time for testimonies. Many persons began with, “I am a man/woman with a history...” It may have been a history of drug abuse or a history of crime. But now they looked back and rejoiced that God redeemed their life. The history remains and continues to haunt and shape them. But they are not bound to it.

Your testimony may not be as dramatic; still, the key is that God can free us from our past mistakes and sins, yet use our past to help us help others. That is good news!

Conclude with a prayer something like this: *Redeem our lives, Lord. As we go through the stages of our lives, help us to always turn to you. We celebrate how you have graced us in so many ways. Help us to trust and obey in this Advent season and to the end of our lives. Amen.*

¹⁵ Achtemeier, 9.

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¹⁶ Text is from Scot McKnight, *The Second Testament: A New Translation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2023). Diagrams are from Paul Achtemeier, *Romans, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1985), 5,7,12.