

Romans 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Romans chapter 1 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. First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.

For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you.

For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.

[1 : 14] I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you, but thus far have been prevented, in order that I may reap some harvest among you, as well as among the rest of the Gentiles.

I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.

For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, the righteous shall live by faith. For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.

So they are without excuse. For although they know God, they did not honour him as God, or give thanks to him. But they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

[2 : 28] Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man, and birds, and animals, and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up to the lusts of their hearts, in impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature, rather than the creator, who is blessed forever.

Amen. For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women, and were consumed with passion for one another.

Men committing shameless acts with men, and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them, but give approval to those who practice them. Paul writes to the Christians in Rome as one who had not yet visited the city.

[3 : 58] His motives for doing so seem to be that of establishing a base for his future ministry in the Roman Church. Most prominent in the concerns of this letter is the bringing together of Jews and Gentiles in the Gospel.

One challenge that Paul faces is that although he has several connections in the Church in Rome, as we see in chapter 16, he wasn't its founder. He might be seen to be illegitimately inserting himself into someone else's field of labour.

John Barclay suggests that the reason why Paul takes the tack that he does is because he needs to demonstrate to the Romans that as the apostle to the Gentiles, he is their apostle. Paul isn't just one of several apostles to the Gentiles, but he is the apostle to the Gentiles, as Peter is the lead apostle to the circumcision.

The Roman Church can gain an understanding of their part within the much greater picture from him. This is why so much of the book is devoted to the issue of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles, and the way that it fulfills God's purposes.

As we see in verses 5 and 6 of this chapter, the Christians in Rome are predominantly believing Gentiles. Paul introduces himself as a servant or slave of Christ Jesus.

[5 : 09] He has been called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he proceeds to express in condensed form. As a slave, Paul is bound to his master and to the task that has been given to him.

Although the gospel is a gospel of freedom, Paul explores the paradoxical relationship between slavery and freedom at various points in his epistles, not least in this epistle in chapter 6.

He has been set apart for this purpose. We might recall the setting apart of priests and those devoted to a sacred calling. The gospel is in fulfilment of earlier prophetic scripture, some of which he will appeal to as the letter progresses.

The term gospel is one that draws from Old Testament prophecy, especially passages such as Isaiah chapter 40 verse 9. Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news.

Lift up your voice with strength. O Jerusalem, herald of good news. Lift it up. Fear not. Say to the cities of Judah, Behold your God. And also in Isaiah 52 verse 7.

[6 : 10] How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, Your God reigns.

Paul is charged with bringing the word of this gospel, a message fulfilled in the claim that Jesus is Israel's Messiah and the world's true Lord. God is establishing his reign.

The passages from Isaiah that speak of the gospel are speaking about God returning to rule among his people, the signs of God coming near to Zion, and that return of God to rule being a sign of judgment and deliverance and a source of joy and comfort to a once beleaguered people.

For Paul, the message of the gospel is a message concerning God's Son. Behind this we should probably hear the words of 2 Samuel chapter 7 verses 12 to 14. According to the flesh, Jesus is the descendant of David.

He is the Davidic heir of the promises of the kingdom. He was marked out as, or declared to be, the Messiah, the Davidic son of God, in the resurrection. He was already the Messiah, of course, but it was in the resurrection that this fact was openly declared.

[7 : 35] We might recall the way that the truth of Jesus' messianic identity was a secret for much of the gospel narrative. Particularly in the gospel of Mark, this is a prominent theme. It is only after the resurrection that the secret of Christ's messianic identity is shouted from the rooftops.

We should also observe the spirit-flesh contrast that is going on here. Christ's physical descent from David is important, but far more important is the fact that he bears the powerful spirit of holiness.

In the resurrection, the new creation of the spirit dawns, being inaugurated even in the time of the flesh. Through the resurrected Messiah and Lord, Jesus, Paul has received his commission, apostleship to the nations.

The intent of this commission is establishing the obedience of faith, the appropriate believing and willing response to the message of God's reign established in Jesus the Messiah. This calling is to be exercised among all of the nations, among whom the Romans themselves are included.

Paul's typical epistle refers to the prayers that he makes for the people to whom he is writing. We see the same pattern here. We should consider the way in which Paul's ministry of teaching and writing is accompanied by an extensive ministry of prayer.

[8 : 48] The news of the Roman Christians' believing response to the message of the gospel has gotten around. One can imagine the excitement for Paul of hearing that a growing community of faithful persons can now be found in the very heart of the greatest city of the empire, especially for Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.

Meeting these Christians would have been something that he longed to do. He wants to benefit them and to play some part in what God is doing there. Paul has a calling both to Greeks and to barbarians, to the two great divisions of Gentile humanity.

He has a message for the church in Rome as the apostle to the Gentiles and is eager to share it with them. Most commentators see in verses 16 and 17 a great summary statement of Paul's gospel message.

Paul is not ashamed of this gospel, although it may seem to be foolishness to many. His confidence in the gospel is and will be vindicated. None who believe in it will be put to shame.

The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. The power isn't merely something that accompanies the gospel message, nor is the gospel merely about God's power.

[9 : 55] God's power is active in the declaration of the gospel message itself. Through it, God is forming a people for his son by his spirit. And this is a message to the Jew first and then also to the Greek.

As we will see in this epistle, the message of Jesus the Messiah is in the first place a message to the circumcised. But it is also a message that brings in Gentiles on an equal footing.

In the gospels and in Acts, the message of the kingdom of God goes to Jews first, and when they reject it, it goes out to the Gentiles. In the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed.

What exactly Paul is referring to in the expression, the righteousness of God, has been a matter of considerable debate. Some have seen in this a reference to God's perfect moral standard.

For many Protestants, historically, the expression has been interpreted as a reference to the imputed righteousness of Christ, Christ's perfect righteousness that is graciously put to our account.

[10 : 53] Although there may be some good theology underlying the concerns that drive this historic reading, I don't think these senses of the righteousness of God are what Paul is referring to in this juncture.

Rather, it seems to me, the righteousness of God needs to be read more in terms of the use of such terminology in the Old Testament, especially in places like the Psalms and Isaiah. There, the righteousness of God is primarily his saving righteousness, his restorative setting of the world to rights in fulfilment of his gracious covenant commitment to his people, something that's achieved through judgment and salvation.

For Paul, this is revealed from faith, for faith, or to faith. The meaning of this expression is somewhat opaque. Some commentators have seen here a reference to the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, Jesus' own faithfulness exercised towards us, producing faith in us.

Again, this might be true enough theologically, but I'm not quite persuaded that it is what is in view here. I'm more inclined to see this as a reference to God's faithfulness to his promises, leading to the answering faith of those who hear the message of his salvation.

This statement ends with a quotation from Habakkuk 2, verse 4. There is some ambiguity over the party whose faith is in view in the Habakkuk text, as Paul quotes it.

[12 : 12] In the Septuagint, the faith is God's faithfulness. In the original Hebrew, it is probably best taken as a reference to human faith. It could be a reference to the way that, in a time of difficulty, the righteous believer lives by confident anticipation of God's deliverance, or to the way that they live by God's faithfulness to them.

Perhaps an argument could also be made that Paul is using this in a Christological way. Christ is the righteous one. In some respects, not a very great deal is riding upon the way that we resolve such questions.

In this case, all of those senses resonate with something in Paul's message in this letter. The very ambiguity of the statement presents the reader with fertile ground for reflection upon the manifold relationships between the terms of righteousness and faith or faithfulness.

God's righteousness is revealed in the Gospel message. This righteousness is revealed in the conditions of sharpest contrast with the unrighteousness of men who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth as its bleak backdrop.

The repetition of the term unrighteousness makes the opposition very clear. God's gracious righteousness is not given in response to men's righteousness, but in the situation of deep unrighteousness.

[13 : 27] Indeed, one of the things that is being revealed at this point in history is God's wrath against sin and against mankind's suppression of the truth. The wrath will be revealed climactically on the last day.

However, it has also been revealed in the death of Christ and will be revealed again in the great judgments against Israel and the nations on the near horizon. God has revealed himself in his creation and he's done so plainly.

The knowledge that Paul speaks of need not be considered to be the sort of theoretical knowledge that we arrive at through philosophical reflection, even though these truths about God are knowable in such a manner.

The attributes that are revealed are invisible, yet they are disclosed in creation. In Psalm 19 verses 1 to 4, the psalmist says, Even though we suppress it, sometimes to the point that we may not know that we know it, we all have some basic apprehension of the truth of God.

We can blind ourselves to the truth and we can dull ourselves to the truth. But ultimately, no one can live consistently as if God did not exist. On some level, deep down, all of us have an apprehension of God's reality.

[14 : 52] Indeed, it is precisely on account of this sense that our need for forms of idolatry that disguise the truth is so pronounced. The appropriate response to such knowledge is to honour God and to give thanks to him.

And yet, when this response is not made, the result is that hearts become darkened. Where there was once the light of revelation and knowledge, when that light is consistently rejected, people will find themselves groping in darkness.

Presumed wisdom actually led to folly. Perhaps there is an allusion back to the story of the Garden of Eden here, where grasping for wisdom in sin led to shame and folly. Also to Psalm 106 verses 19 to 22, they made a calf in Horeb and worshipped a metal image.

They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass. They forgot God, their saviour, who had done great things in Egypt, wondrous works in the land of Ham, and awesome deeds by the Red Sea.

Idolatry, which replaces the otherness of God with our own creations and projections, is the fundamental sin. The result of this dishonouring of God is the poetic justice of human beings dishonouring their own bodies.

[16 : 05] The honour of the body is an important theme in scripture. However, where God is lost sight of in practical atheism, dishonouring of the body is the result. If rejecting the light of the knowledge of God leads to hearts being darkened, the rejection of the holiness of God leads to the dishonouring of our bodies.

There was a direct exchange of the truth for the lie and of God for a counterfeit. Paul here presents homosexual passions and relations as a paradigmatic result of the breakdown of man's dignity after his rejection of God.

God gave them up to such things. Once the restraints are removed, sin can take control over people. In cultures that reject God, sexual license can take on the character of a sort of perverse anti-religion.

In place of the dignifying knowledge of God comes promiscuous and unbounded sexuality that dishonours the body, imprisoning it to its lusts. Homosexual passions and relations for Paul break down one of the most fundamental features of humanity made in the image of God, that we are male and female.

The poetic justice that Paul sees in this should be recognised. If we reject the transcendent otherness of God, the otherness of the other sex will be rejected too.

[17 : 22] And where humanity was once called to be fruitful and multiply and to exercise dominion, it can turn in on itself in fruitlessness and sterility under the cruel dominion of its lusts.

Paul sees this as a shameful degradation of humanity. Paul then points to a structure to same-sex relations and passions that is degrading of humanity.

Paul is not talking about quite the same thing as we do when we speak of homosexuality and LGB persons. However, there is quite clearly considerable overlap as the church has recognised throughout its history.

We should beware of over-individualising Paul's teaching here though, as if he were saying that persons with homosexual desires are peculiarly sinful. His argument is more about human society as a whole.

While Paul singles out homosexual desires and relations as paradigmatic of what a society is given up to when it devotes itself to self-love under the mask of its own idolatrous creations and projections, persons who have but resist such desires are not given up to such a sexual culture in the way that Paul is speaking of here.

[18 : 29] We might draw comparisons with the sin of suicide. Suicide as self-murder could appropriately be seen as a profoundly paradigmatic sin. It's a striking out at the image of God in ourselves.

However, people who commit suicide, while they are committing something incredibly serious, are very, very seldom committing suicide as an intentional performance of that paradigmatic sin.

Rather, they may be acting out of the deepest depths of despair, out of extreme irrational impulse, or in response to unbearable pain. While recognising just how serious the sin of suicide is, considered in itself, we should consider with compassion and understanding the reasons why people might commit it, and recognise how unwitting or unintended they might be, nor should we consider them sinful beyond all other persons.

I believe the same applies to persons with homosexual desires. Here the social character of God's giving up of people to sin should be focused upon. A society that has been given over will start to give itself over to self-destruction and self-degradation.

An entire sexual culture will develop around the practice and approval of homosexual relations and desires. Such a society ends up courting death. It loses sight of the fruitfulness and the joy and the otherness of humanity created as male and female in the image of God.

[19 : 53] And as it loses sight of God, it will become more and more imprisoned to its own lusts. In Paul's understanding, for such a society, the penalty for sin is found in the degradation of the sin itself.

If people don't see fit to acknowledge God, God will give them up to an unfit mind to do things that are inappropriate. Once again, the punishment fits the sin.

And God's giving up of people is not something imposed upon them from without. Rather, it is more a matter of God removing the restraints and allowing the sin to go where it naturally goes, taking the sinners with it.

When people reject God, Paul is arguing, they end up degrading themselves. Their own humanity becomes misshapen and distorted in tragic ways. And this is fertile ground for every form of sin and vice.

Such sins and vices fill people up and take possession of them and control of them. Paul lists a large number of these dehumanizing vices, concluding with senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

[20 : 55] Now, not every person or society will express these vices in equal measure or in equal proportions. However, these are all the sorts of demons that will possess those societies that reject God.

Such persons know deep down that what they are doing is dishonoring to God and also to themselves, that those who give themselves over to these things have treated God's gift of life with scorn and that death is the appropriate sanction for those who have rebelled against the giver of life.

Many such persons will be consumed by the destructive tendencies of their own self-hatred, eating themselves up within themselves. However, as if it were not enough to do such acts, they will go out of their way to approve such sins and vices and to form societies in which evil is increasingly called good.

A question to consider. How does Paul's description of the problem here give us indications of the shape that an appropriate solution must take?