

Living by Faith

Last week I shared a dozen postcards that I imagined Barnabas could have sent during his travels with Paul. Today we heard the beginning of a letter that most Biblical scholars believe Paul did, in fact, write and send.¹

Of the twenty-seven books in the New Testament, fourteen have traditionally been attributed to Paul. All of these are in the form of letters addressed to an individual or a community. These books are arranged in a block following Acts and separated into three groups: the nine letters addressed to communities, the four letters addressed to individuals, and Hebrews. Within each grouping, the letters are ordered according to length. Thus, Romans is the first book after Acts, not because it's the first or most important letter Paul wrote, but because it's the longest of the letters written to communities.

While some of the letters preserved in the New Testament that are attributed to Paul were probably not written by him, it's widely accepted that he did pen this letter to the followers of Jesus in Rome. Paul wrote his letters during the height of his first century missionary activity, between 50 and 58 CE. They're the earliest surviving Christian documents, predating Mark, the earliest of the Gospels, by at least ten years.

When reading a particular book of the Bible, it's important to consider its genre. Think of literature. Are you reading fiction, nonfiction, drama, poetry, or folktale. Think of music. Are you listening to rock, hip hop, heavy metal, classical, jazz, pop, or bluegrass? Think of TV. Are you watching a scripted show, a so-called reality show, or a documentary? The genre affects the way you read, listen, and watch. It affects your expectations and the way you interpret what happens.

Depending on who is doing the classifying, the genres in the Bible include history, poetry, prophecy, gospels, and epistles (also known as letters). The first five books of the Bible are often classified as law and the last book could be classified as apocalyptic literature. We read a letter differently than we read history, poetry, or prophecy. We need to consider the writer, the recipients, and the purpose of the letter.

Paul wrote the letter to the Romans during the winter of 57–58 CE while he was in the Greek city of Corinth. Paul's letters tended to be written in response to specific crises. For instance, 1 Corinthians was written to reprove the Christian community in Corinth for its internal divisions and for its immoral sexual practices. But Romans doesn't address specific questions of contemporary practice. Instead, Paul addresses broad questions of theology. Also, in contrast to the passionate and personal pleas in his other letters, the tone of Romans is solemn and restrained. This could be explained by timing: Romans was the last of the letters Paul wrote. It could be seen as a summary of his thought, composed as his career moved toward its conclusion. But it's also true that, as opposed to the churches in Corinth, Galatia, Thessalonica, and Philippi, Paul didn't plant any of the churches in Rome. In fact, at the time when he wrote Romans, Paul had never even visited Rome, although the greetings included at the end of the letter indicate that he had acquaintances there.

Writing to a community largely composed of strangers affected the tone and content of the letter. This also explains why the first seven verses of Romans contain the most extensive salutation and greeting of any of Paul's letters.

He begins by introducing himself.

*From Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for God's good news.*²

¹ Sources consulted include John E. Toews, *Romans*, BCBC, Herald Press, 2004, pp. 20-64; Spill the Beans: Worship and Learning Resources for All Ages, [Past Issues | Spill The Beans](#); SparkNotes, [Bible: The New Testament The Letter of Paul to the Romans \(Romans\) Summary & Analysis | SparkNotes](#); Pulpit Fiction Narrative Podcast, [NL 143: Gospel as Salvation — Pulpit Fiction](#); BibleWorm Podcast, [Episode 442 From Faith for Faith \(Romans 1:1-17\) | BibleWorm \(biblewormpodcast.com\)](#); and Working Preacher Narrative Lectionary Podcast, [Working Preacher's Narrative Lectionary: Narrative Lectionary 539: Gospel as Salvation - May 7, 2023 \(libsyn.com\)](#).

² Romans 1:1, *Common English Bible*

In Rome, where social ranking is particularly important, Paul puts himself at the very bottom of that ranking, a slave. At the same time, he describes himself as an apostle – a commissioned representative – which would place him higher in the ranking system.

Next, he introduces the gospel he proclaims.

*God promised this good news about his Son ahead of time through his prophets in the holy scriptures. His Son was descended from David. He was publicly identified as God's Son with power through his resurrection from the dead, which was based on the Spirit of holiness. This Son is Jesus Christ our Lord.*³

It's difficult for us to grasp how radical it is for Paul to refer to Jesus as Christ, the anointed one, and Lord. The Greek word translated as "good news" is *euangelion*. This word was used in Rome when announcing the appearance or accession to the throne of the emperor who was worshipped as the spirit and protector of the empire.

We got a glimpse of this yesterday in the coronation of King Charles. In an interview with a BBC reporter a few days earlier, the Archbishop of Canterbury highlighted the religious aspect of the event.⁴ He explained that the theme of the whole coronation is service. The king receives all this authority in order to be a blessing and a servant to the people. According to the Archbishop, the most sacred moment is when he anoints the king with holy oil. This occurs behind a screen, out of sight of the public. The anointing represents the gift of the Holy Spirit of God equipping the king to bear the burden of the crown.

While this wouldn't have been the case in most of the previous coronations, in this modern age the Archbishop expanded this call of God beyond the king saying, "I trust in the God who calls each one of us – who called me, who calls the king and queen – that in this beautiful Christian service, God will touch us and lead us."

Let's return to Paul. In his introduction to the gospel he proclaims, he connects the Christian story to the Jewish story. Jesus was descended from David, therefore he was in the proper line to be the messiah the Jews had long awaited. The problem with Jesus was that, at first, he wasn't a very good messiah in the sense of what was expected. He didn't restore Israel. And he got himself killed. According to Paul, it's in his resurrection that the messiahship of Jesus is confirmed. Without resurrection, none of this makes sense. Without resurrection, Jesus is just some guy killed by Romans.

Reading on,

*Through him we have received God's grace and our appointment to be apostles. This was to bring all Gentiles to faithful obedience for his name's sake. You who are called by Jesus Christ are also included among these Gentiles.*⁵

Paul understands himself to have a special call from Jesus to spread the gospel among the Gentiles.

*To those in Rome who are dearly loved by God and called to be God's people. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*⁶

Paul acknowledges that the Roman Christians share his call. Some of them are Gentiles. Some are Jews. All have been called to be God's people and share the good news of Jesus. And, by all reports, they are faithfully living out this call.

*First of all, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because the news about your faithfulness is being spread throughout the whole world. I serve God in my spirit by preaching the good news about God's Son, and God is my witness that I continually mention you in all my prayers. I'm always asking that somehow, by God's will, I might succeed in visiting you at last.*⁷

It must have been encouraging to know that there were those in Rome who embraced the faith. Paul recognizes this, gives thanks for it and acknowledges the benefits of his meeting at some point in the future with these Christians so that they can encourage one another in faith.

³ Romans 1:2-4, *Common English Bible*

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32vOXffXfkw> beginning at 1:42:56.

⁵ Romans 1:5-6, *Common English Bible*

⁶ Romans 1:7, *Common English Bible*

⁷ Romans 1:8-10, *Common English Bible*

*I really want to see you to pass along some spiritual gift to you so that you can be strengthened. What I mean is that we can mutually encourage each other while I am with you. We can be encouraged by the faithfulness we find in each other, both your faithfulness and mine.*⁸

Paul aligns himself with the people to whom he is writing. He doesn't set himself above them. All of them have been called to this task. They've already been doing the work in Rome that he's been called to do, and he wants to join them in this work. He's not planning to fix a problem or change what they are doing, but to share in the mutuality of community and companionship. They can encourage each other in their work.

In verses 8-12, most Bible translation use the word "faith" rather than "faithfulness." What is the best word here? Belief? Faith? Faithfulness? Belief is in the mind. It's an intellectual commitment, a cognitive agreement with something. Faith also has more of an internal sense to it. Faithfulness involves trust and commitment but also includes action. It involves living out what you believe. It includes putting faith into action.

Paul continues by repeating his desire to go to Rome.

*I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that I planned to visit you many times, although I have been prevented from coming until now. I want to harvest some fruit among you, just as I have done among the other Gentiles. I have a responsibility both to Greeks and to those who don't speak Greek, both to the wise and to the foolish.*⁹

There are several ways to interpret the phrase "harvest some fruit among you." Is Paul talking about an evangelical campaign to bring more people to faith in Christ? Perhaps. Is he looking for a financial harvest, monetary support to be able to go on to other places and proclaim the mission further? Yes, it's likely he would like some financial support. It's also possible that Paul is talking about joining this relatively small group in their large task of putting their faith into action and calling others to be followers of Jesus. Paul can contribute to their mission because he's been pretty good at it in other places. He can serve as a consultant to help them and reinvigorate them.

Paul understands that he has been given a mission by Jesus. He feels it's his responsibility to spread the gospel as widely as he can, both in terms of geography and the kinds of people he encounters. He feels a sense of responsibility, especially to the Gentile world and Rome is the center of the Gentile world.

Paul's introduction ends with what could be considered the thesis statement of his letter to the Roman Christians.

*That's why I'm ready to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome. I'm not ashamed of the gospel: it is God's own power for salvation to all who have faith in God, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. God's righteousness is being revealed in the gospel, from faithfulness for faith, as it is written, The righteous person will live by faith.*¹⁰

Paul isn't ashamed of the gospel of Jesus. In an honor and shame culture, this statement is significant. In Roman culture, crucifixion was intended to be the most shameful thing that could happen to a person – all clothes stripped off, beaten in public, nailed to a cross, hung up so everyone who walked by could watch you die. But Paul isn't ashamed of that thing that's supposed to be the most shameful. In fact, it's through this most shameful thing that God does the work that God intended to do in the world.

Paul again emphasizes mutuality – mutual faithfulness. And this time he adds God to the mix. God is part of the mutual encouragement he talked about earlier. In fact, faith begins with God. God's faithfulness to humankind initiates human's faithful response to God

God already had this mutual faithfulness with the Jews and they're still there. It's not past tense. God also has this mutual faithfulness with the Greeks. There's no limit to who the recipients are. God's salvation has expanded. It hasn't shifted from one group to another. It's for everyone.

⁸ Romans 1:11-12, *Common English Bible*

⁹ Romans 1:13-14, *Common English Bible*

¹⁰ Romans 1:15-17, *Common English Bible*

Salvation is more than what happens to your soul when you die; it's also about setting free from the power of oppression in the world here and now. The way Rome has constructed the world in ways that are unjust will no longer be that way. For Christians, Caesar is no longer Lord; Jesus is Lord.

I've spent a lot of time talking about the words Paul wrote and how they might have been offered and received in his context. Along the way you may have noticed ways this might connect with us in our context. I'll end with a few questions for you to consider.

When you introduce yourself, how do you start?

How often does an introduction contain something about your faith?

How do you describe who Jesus is?

Who are you in relation to Jesus?

How are you living out your faith?

What might be holding you back?

What could be causing you to be ashamed of the gospel?

How do you encourage and inspire other people who are living out their faith, sometimes in difficult circumstances?

We claim that we are a Christian community seeking to share God's love through celebration, nurture, service, and peacemaking. May we trust that God is bringing about a new world that is closer to the one God intended. May we be faithful in our response, not ashamed of our role in God's work, not ashamed of the gospel. Amen.