
§1 *The Salutation (Rom. 1:1–7)*

The first seventeen verses of Romans serve as an introduction to the epistle and fall into three parts. The first part, verses 1–7, is Paul’s salutation. In the second part, verses 8–15, Paul introduces himself and speaks of his desire to visit Rome. The third and final part is verses 16–17, in which Paul broaches the seminal theme of his gospel, justification by faith for both Jew and Gentile.

First, the salutation. Letters in Hellenistic times followed a standard literary pattern. Unlike the modern convention of beginning letters with an address to the recipient, salutations in the Greco-Roman world normally included three pieces of information: the name of the sender, the name of the recipient, and a brief greeting. Two letters recorded in the book of Acts (15:23 and 23:26) follow this pattern quite closely, as do 1 Thessalonians and James.

In writing to Rome Paul expands the salutation considerably. After introducing himself as one commissioned for the gospel of God (v. 1), he plunges into a description of the gospel and his apostleship. Not until verse 7 does he complete the salutation with mention of the recipients and a greeting. In Greek the first seven verses are a single sentence of some ninety words! This is the longest and most formal introduction of a Pauline epistle, containing a mixture of conventional formulae and innovation. This is probably due to the fact that Paul is writing to a church which he neither founded nor visited. He expands the salutation into a brief *credo* of the faith which he holds in common with the Romans in order to establish credibility with a church to which he is personally unknown. Moreover, if Paul has any apprehensions that his subsequent message might raise eyebrows among his Roman readers, he endeavors from the outset to make the most favorable impression possible. Finally, Paul normally mentions his fellow missionaries as co-senders of his epistles (Sosthenes,

Timothy, or Silvanus). In Romans, however, he writes alone. One gets the impression from this and from the overall salutation that the apostle intends to take special responsibility for the contents of this epistle.

1:1–2 / The first verse of Romans is an extraordinary testimony to the God who breaks into the world of humanity. **Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God.** Here are two planes of reality. There is Paul, a human being who belongs to the same world we do; and there is God, who is beyond our world and yet intersects it with the gospel of Jesus Christ. God and humanity, heaven and earth, the eternal and temporal, the invisible and visible. Paul's message is not about a closed universe in which human beings are laboratory rats conditioned by their environment. The first stroke of his pen heralds an open universe, a world much larger than our empirical experience of it, a world, to be sure, which begins at our human level but which is not limited to it. There is a God who breaks into this world and enlarges its possibilities. Above and yet within the dirge of human history can be heard a single pure note of divine music, penetrating and transforming the entire orchestration. God has spoken in the gospel, and the words of this world can never again be the same.

Paul's role in this divine-human encounter is characterized by the words **servant, apostle, and set apart**. Each term is packed with meaning. The word *doulos*, which in Greek means a slave, is in the NIV rendered **servant**. In ancient Greece and Rome there were basically two social classes, the upper-class, known as *makarioi*, and the lower-class, *douloi*. Slavery is the ownership of one person by another; a slave was hence the possession, property, or commodity of someone else. Slavery in the ancient world was not based on theories of racial inferiority, as it was in the antebellum South, for instance. In this respect ancient slavery was a more humane institution. Nevertheless, if slaves were not regarded as chattel, they were regarded as inferior beings, destined for a variety of roles of servitude, constituting perhaps one-fourth of the population.

In referring to himself as a **servant of Christ Jesus**, Paul does not desire to conjure up abject associations of subjugation, drudgery, and cruelty. His intention rather is to assert his exclusive allegiance to God's absolute sovereignty. As a slave, Paul

belongs to God. It is not Paul who determines what he will say and do; God's sovereign decision determines who he is and what he must do. In this respect Paul's use of *doulos* agrees with its usage in the OT. Moses (Josh. 14:7), Joshua (Josh. 24:29), David (Ps. 89:3), the prophets, and Israel are called "servants of the Lord." Israel had been chosen by God and was his peculiar people and "treasured possession" (Exod. 19:5), uniquely set apart by God and hence singularly committed to God. Similarly, God's claim on Paul is total; Paul's loyalty to God is final.

James Dunn (*Romans 1–8*, p. 8) suggests that Paul employs *doulos* with specific reference to the Servant of the Lord hymns in Isaiah (42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–11a; 52:13–53:12). The second hymn declares, "You are my servant" (Isa. 49:3), and adds, "I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth" (v. 6). Paul's life was a commentary on this verse. He considered himself the apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 22:21; Gal. 2:9), and he aspired to preach to Jews and Gentiles, not only in Rome but to "the limits of the West," as Clement of Rome would later say (1 Clem. 5:7).

Paul also refers to himself as an **apostle**. The Greek noun *apostolos*, from which the English word "apostle" is derived, comes from the verb *apostellein*, "to send someone with a commission." It was at his conversion on the road to Damascus and his subsequent reflection on that event (Acts 9:1–22) that Paul became aware that he was God's "chosen instrument to carry [God's] name before the Gentiles" (Acts 9:15). By prefixing **called to apostle** Paul denotes that he is no self-appointed ambassador, but divinely appointed and commissioned. He stands in the tradition of Abraham (Gen. 12:1–2), Moses (Exod. 3:10ff.), Isaiah (6:8–9), and Jeremiah (1:4–5), all of whom were called by God. **Apostle** speaks not only the language of election but also the language of grace, for "it is not the godly who are called, but precisely the ungodly whom God has justified and made his own people" (Kaylor, *Covenant Community*, p. 21). "For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect" (1 Cor. 15:9–10).

The consciousness of being God's chosen instrument is further established by **set apart**. Paul's election was understood not as a general truism (e.g., that all people are loved by God), nor in a sense of national pride (e.g., that most peoples consider

their nations to play a unique role in history). Like every Jew, Paul knew that God had chosen men and women in the history of Israel to do his particular will (e.g., Jer. 1:4-5). **Set apart** expressed Paul's personal destiny; he was gripped by the conviction that *he* was chosen for a unique vocation, for "God set me apart from birth and called me by his grace" (Gal. 1:15; see also Acts 13:2). The Greek word for **set apart**, *aphorismenos*, is the normal Greek rendering of the Hebrew word for "Pharisee," which probably means "to separate." If Paul is indulging in a word play he seems to indicate that he now is a different kind of Pharisee from what he had been. Previously he had been a Pharisee separated *from* Gentiles; now he is separated *for* them!

Verse 1 is unambiguous about Paul's self-understanding. He does not fancy himself a religious genius, nor does he trumpet his creative ability. His message is not from himself but from God, and whatever honor is ascribed to Paul must be attributed not to any greatness in him but to a power above him, to God who has radically intersected his life. The preeminence of that encounter forever changed his orientation, and at a deeper level his self-understanding. Only one response could be appropriate to the overwhelming favor of God, and that was to allow Christ absolute claim over his life, and to surrender himself to a truth and to a task which alone were worthy of his existence.

That truth was **the gospel of God**. **Gospel** in Greek comes from a compound word meaning "good report," or as we say, "good news." In saying that he was **set apart for the gospel of God** Paul does not mean, generally speaking, that he now believes the gospel whereas he formerly did not. He means that he has been specifically commissioned to proclaim the gospel, to make it known. For Paul the gospel was not something a person possesses, but rather something which possesses him. The gospel was more than a state of affairs or a truth which could be exhausted in a propositional statement. Rather, it is the ceaseless energy of God's love to illuminate the darkness, whose purpose it is to bring salvation to the lost. The gospel is really not a thing, but a person, Jesus Christ!

God **promised** the gospel **beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scripture** regarding his Son (vv. 2-3; see Titus 1:2). This connects Paul's experience as a Christian with his history as a Jew. It establishes that Jesus Christ is not an afterthought of God, a scissors-and-paste remedy when the human experiment

failed. Rather, Jesus Christ had long been foreseen in Israel, and apart from him all that had gone before was incomplete. Jesus Christ was the goal in a long history of salvation, the anchor runner, so to speak, in the divine relay from Abraham to the day of salvation. God's work in Israel had not been an impersonal force, randomly groping toward a higher state of perfection. Paul is rather proclaiming the one, personal God who before all ages created the world, called a people in Abraham, and throughout their history purposefully and patiently increased their knowledge of him. Then, in Paul's own time, God spoke his last word. The awesome finality that Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose stamped Paul's consciousness with an indelible sense of duty and obligation. Paul is a **servant, called, apostle, and set apart**.

1:3–4 / Verses 1–2 introduce the gospel, but verses 3–4 explore its meaning. The gospel **regards** God's **Son**, which means that Jesus Christ is the content of it. Paul names Jesus Christ four times in the first seven verses (vv. 1, 4, 6, 7). This leaves no doubt that God's Son is not merely the founder of the gospel, he *is* the gospel!

Verses 3–4 contain a brief credal statement, the parallelism of which is clearer in Greek than in the NIV: **As to his human nature he was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead**. It is likely that Paul is citing a christological formula with which the Romans were already familiar, not unlike 2 Timothy 2:8. This is a much debated passage, but a straightforward reading of it offers the most credible understanding. The subject is God's Son who was revealed in two stages or is known in two time periods: according to the flesh he was born of Davidic descent, according to the Spirit he was declared Son of God in power. The Greek word for "flesh" (NIV, **human nature**) is often in Paul used pejoratively to imply human weakness, fallibility, and sin. But there are instances where Paul uses the term to mean "human existence" without any negative reference, and this appears to be one of them. In referring to Jesus as a descendant of David, Paul is speaking of his earthly, pre-resurrection life. Jesus is thus the Messiah promised to David (see 2 Sam. 7:11–14), indeed more than the Messiah, the Son of God, but the Son of God in humility, incognito. The revelation and minis-

try of God's Son thus stands in continuity with the OT, the "gospel [which God] promised beforehand through his prophets" (v. 2).

The resurrection, however, separates the two stages or time periods. It is a dividing line not in Jesus' status as Son of God, but in his function as Son of God. As seed of David Jesus was the Son in humility; as Son of God in power he enters his role as exalted Lord. The NIV rendering of verse 4 (he **was declared with power to be the Son of God**) might suggest that Jesus *became* the Son of God at the resurrection, although he had not been so beforehand. That is scarcely Paul's thought. At the resurrection Jesus was constituted Son of God *in power*, whereas before the resurrection he had been Son of God in suffering. Thus, verses 3–4 are not about Jesus' promotion or adoption as God's Son. Both parts of the formula are **regarding God's Son** (v. 3), but God's Son in two manifestations: as servant and Lord, in humiliation and exaltation, in earthly ministry and heavenly reign.

1:5 / Paul now moves from the content of the gospel to the commission of the gospel. **Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship.** Grace is not a vague force of benevolence in the universe, nor merely the good intentions of the Almighty. *Grace is absolutely personal, for it is focused in and channeled through the person of Jesus Christ—* **Through him . . . we received grace.** Grace is an *act*, not a feeling or disposition. It is something which God did at a particular point in space and time when Pontius Pilate was governor from A.D. 26 to 36 of an imperial province on the eastern fringe of the Roman Empire. Grace is the incomprehensible fact that God loves the world in spite of its rebelliousness. It is the master plan of God's love, the wonderful and awesome surprise that where the world deserved *nothing* from God it could hope for *everything* from God.

Grace was the origin of Paul's apostleship. The NT makes two seemingly contradictory statements about Paul. By his own admission he was "the chief of sinners" (1 Tim. 1:12–17), but he was also a "chosen instrument" of God (Acts 9:15–16). These two statements reveal the paradox of grace. Grace is the intersection where unconditional love meets human unworthiness.

Paul's commission is to lead the Gentiles to **the obedience that comes from faith.** This passage, along with verses 13–15 and 11:13–21, indicates that Paul is writing to Gentiles and that his commission is to bring them to "the obedience of faith," to trans-

late the Greek literally. This phrase both commences (1:5) and concludes the epistle (16:26), and everything which Paul says in between serves this goal. There is no separation in Paul's mind between faith and obedience, between believing and doing. "Only he who believes is obedient," said Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "and only he who is obedient believes" (*Cost of Discipleship*, p. 69). The Book of James is particularly aware of the problem of saying one thing and doing another (James 2:14–26). Jesus himself taught that a tree is known by the fruit it bears (Matt. 7:15–20; see also 21:28–32). His call to "Follow me" demands an *act* which embodies a belief.

1:6–7 / Paul concludes the salutation in verses 6–7. He has been commissioned as apostle to the Gentiles, and hence he writes to the Gentiles in Rome, who, like himself, are **called to belong to Jesus Christ**. Paul's reputation had preceded him to Rome. He makes no mention of his conversion or his years on the mission field; surely these have long been identified with his name. But less desirable reports have also been associated with his name. Shortly after writing Romans Paul traveled to Jerusalem where James reported to him, "Many thousands of Jews . . . have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses" (Acts 21:20–21). Aware of such reports, Paul does not fail at the beginning of Romans to point out his divine commission as well as his orthodoxy and his common faith to the Romans, and to appeal to the unity of all who are **called to belong to Jesus Christ**.

The Romans are **loved by God and called to be saints**. Luther notes that God's love precedes his call. God does not demand that humanity do certain things to earn his love; rather, he loves humanity and enables it to do things according to his will (*Epistle to the Romans*, p. 21). The word **saints** comes from Hebrew and Greek roots meaning "to be set apart" or "holy." A saint is a saint not because of any personal merit but because of God's love and call.

The salutation concludes with Paul's characteristic ascription of **grace and peace**. Grace (*charis*) is a Greek concept which summarizes the gospel in a single word; peace (*šālôm*) is a Hebrew concept which means wholeness and well-being. Both come only **from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ**. Thus, the chief blessings of the old and new covenants find their fulfillment in

Jesus Christ. The essence of the gospel, as T. W. Manson rightly concludes, is to know God as Father (8:15; Gal. 4:6) and to acknowledge Jesus as Lord (10:9–10; 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11; see *Romans*, p. 941).

Additional Notes §1

For a recent study of epistolary forms in the NT, see F. Schnider and W. Stenger, *Studien zum Neutestamentlichen Briefformular*, NTTs 11 (Leiden: Brill, 1987).

1:1–2 / Especially noteworthy is Karl Barth's powerful beginning to *Romans* and his emphasis on the gospel as God's distinct pronouncement in human history. See *Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 27–28.

There is an informative discussion of slavery in the ancient world in *A History of Private Life I: From Pagan Rome to Byzantium*, ed. P. Aries and G. Duby, trans. A. Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Belknap Press, 1987), pp. 51–93.

For discussions of slavery in both the OT and NT, see I. Mendelsohn, "Slavery in the Old Testament," *IDB*, vol. 4, pp. 383–91, and W. G. Rollins, "Slavery in the New Testament," *IDBSup*, pp. 830–32.

1:3–4 / Regarding the christological formula in vv. 3–4, several elements are strange to Paul, including "the seed of David," "a Spirit of holiness," the Greek word for "declare" (*horizein*), and the two participial constructions *genomenou* and *horisthentos* (neither of which is recognizable in the NIV). Failure to mention the death of Christ is also somewhat unPauline. None of these observations alone is proof of a pre-Pauline formula, but their combined effect, especially when condensed within two verses, argues for the probability of an early Christian creed.

On Paul's use of "flesh" with regard to Jesus, see 9:5; 2 Cor. 5:16; 7:5; 10:3; Gal. 2:20; Phil. 1:22, 24. Nevertheless, a merely human understanding of Jesus is a misunderstanding of Jesus. George Ladd rightly says, "For Paul, only the Holy Spirit could enable a man to understand correctly what had really happened in [Jesus'] history." In other words, the witness of the Holy Spirit is necessary to convince a person that Jesus is God's Son. See George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 414–15.

The discussion on vv. 3–4 is summarized from a section of my doctoral dissertation, "The Son of God. Its Antecedents in Judaism and Hellenism and its Use in the Earliest Gospel," Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1978, pp. 105–6.

1:5 / Two brief and helpful discussions of grace can be found in H. Conzelmann, "charis," *TDNT*, vol. 9, pp. 373–76, and A. Richardson,

An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), pp. 281–84.

On the issue of discipleship Bonhoeffer avers that the call to faith is a call to discipleship, and that discipleship is a concrete form of adherence to Christ which can only be undertaken by following Jesus. “Unless he obeys, a man cannot believe” (*Cost of Discipleship*, p. 72).

1:6–7 / T. W. Manson (“St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans—and Others,” in *Romans Debate, Revised*, pp. 4–5) argues that the absence of “Rome” (vv. 7, 15) in some ancient manuscripts (G 1739^{mg} 1908^{mg} it^g Origen) indicates that Romans may have circulated in alternate forms as an open letter. See the discussion of Manson’s position in the Introduction. Textual evidence for Manson’s thesis is considerably limited by the fact that the manuscripts omitting **Rome** are few and late. The evidence for including **Rome**, both in terms of number and age of manuscripts, is vastly superior. See B. Metzger, *TCGNT*, p. 505.