

## Prayer

In this world of jumbled emotions, confusing situations, mixed up rights and wrongs, and unknown futures, be our sanctuary of peace and security, O Lord Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Redeemer. Thank You that through Your death and Resurrection, we may have the assurance of eternal life and eternal peace with Almighty God; for this is our Faith. We praise You for this sure hope and certain destiny. AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*Come before the Lord in penitence and repentance, and seek His forgiveness for all you have done wrong, against God and others*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray about the use of the Bible.** *Pray for God's people to have a renewed passion to know His Word, and seek to live by it*
- *Pray for those who are negotiating peace where people are at war*
- *Give thanks to God for speech and the blessing of communication*

## Meditation

Lord Jesus Christ, grant me the gifts and graces I will need  
To be a faithful disciple and do Your will:

May I accept the nature of the life I have been given;  
May I refrain from jealousy about the gifts of others;  
May I hold my tongue so that I might not hurt others;  
May I smile to show my true delight, and not falsely;  
May I question my own motives and put others first;  
May I conquer my anger before it can conquer me;  
May I give attention to all so they know they are heard;  
May I strive to be a peacemaker, and a person of love,

Complete this work of grace in me so that I may be more like You,  
Christ Jesus, my Saviour and my Lord.

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## Bible passage – Romans 1:1-7

<sup>1</sup> Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, and set apart for the Gospel of God <sup>2</sup> which was previously promised through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, <sup>3</sup> the Gospel about His Son whose natural human descent was from David <sup>4</sup> and who was designated Son of God in power by the Holy Spirit, and Jesus Christ our Lord because of the resurrection from the dead. <sup>5</sup> Through Him we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all nations for the sake of His Name, <sup>6</sup> which also includes you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

<sup>7</sup> To all God's dearly loved people in Rome who are called to be holy: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

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## Bible Study

Review

Today, we begin to study probably the most substantial and influential letter ever written. Romans has had a profound effect on generations of Christians, largely because it contains the only self contained explanation of Christian faith to be found in the Bible. Romans contains some powerful texts, and they have guided Christians for centuries. This is a letter we can return to time and time again for wisdom, correction, spiritual succour and plain advice.

After the introduction (1:1-15), Romans contains a detailed explanation of the state of humanity and the salvation won for us by Jesus and accessed by faith (chs.1-3). Paul then explains that this is consistent with Jewish Scripture (ch.4), and describes the immense benefits of salvation (chs.5-8). In a powerful central section, He describes his heartache at the rejection of Jesus by the Jews (chs.9-11), and then continues by offering sound advice about Christian living (chapters 8 to 14). Lastly, the letter has a lengthy but revealing ending (chs.15,16).

Most of Paul's letters were written to churches he either knew or founded, but this one is quite different. The letter is addressed to the church at Rome, the capital city of the Roman Empire and the supreme centre of power and culture. The Gospel had found its way there quite naturally and probably without evangelism, through the movement of people, perhaps servants attached to the households of high ranking officials in the Roman administration. It was Paul's intention to go to Rome (1:8-15), so he wrote by way of personal introduction. Paul was also concerned that God's people should be united in faith, so it seems obvious that he should set out his beliefs to the church at Rome in a clear and systematic way.

To begin with, Paul introduces himself as an apostle, '*set apart for the Gospel of God*' (1:1); he does not defend the title as he does in other letters. He presumes that the church at Rome have heard of him and will accept his role as a leader of the church. Paul then sets out a summary of the Gospel (1:2-6), so that his readers can be in no doubt about the authenticity of the message he brings. He gives a clear statement of the Gospel, mentioning Scriptures, the prophets and King David, and presenting Jesus as the fulfilment of God's plan. Paul says little more about the Gospel at this point apart from a brief reference to the Holy Spirit and the '*resurrection from the dead*' (1:4), but he concludes by emphasising faith (1:5). He makes it clear that his purpose is to facilitate faith, for the Gospel is the good news that people have access to God through faith in Jesus, His Son. As we will discover, most of the letter is about this faith.

Although this is only an introduction and there is much that Paul does not say, there are a number of interesting features to this passage. Because he is describing the work of Jesus as the fulfilment of God's plan for the world, Paul describes the Gospel as the '*Gospel of God*' (1:1), and not 'the Gospel of Jesus Christ', as we might say. He also describes Jesus as both human and divine, having a '*human descent ... from David*' (1:3) and '*designated Son of God in power by the Holy Spirit*' (1:4). We can read this all too quickly and forget the revolutionary nature of such ideas when they were first written. Also, Paul hints at the task of evangelism in verse 5, where he describes the process of bringing faith to people throughout '*all nations*' (1:5). Again, with only a few words, Paul declares a profound truth not preached before, which is that God's love is for all people and all nations.

In the last verse, Paul greets his readers more specifically. His words reach out to them in Christian fellowship, for the church at Rome are a people '*dearly loved*' and '*called to be holy*' (1:7). He offers his readers his warm, inclusive greeting, using words familiar to both Gentiles and Jews; '*grace and peace ...*'. Paul may not have founded the church at Rome, but he accepted them as God's own people.

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Paul – a man set apart
- The 'Gospel of God'
- The Saviour
- The commission
- The greeting

## Notes on the text and translation

### **V7 'God's dearly loved people in Rome ...'**

It is one of the strange features of the New Testament Greek text that some of the ancient Greek copies of it omit the words 'in Rome'. This is the only mention of Rome in the letter, and there is some speculation that this letter was produced in a number of different versions, some including the reference to Rome and some not, according to the intended destination of the letter(s). However, all this is speculation.

## Going Deeper

Each part of this passage contains valuable insights into Paul's understanding of the Gospel which is built upon in the whole letter. It is therefore very important for us to be clear what some of these well known words and phrases mean. For although many of them are well known to us, we do not necessarily use them in the same way Paul did, and we must remember that he was the first person to put all this together as a coherent understanding of who Jesus was, what he did, and why.

### ***Paul – a man set apart***

In the first sentence of Paul's letter, he uses four words to describe himself; 'servant' (or 'slave'), 'called', 'apostle', and 'set apart'. All these words except one ('apostle') have a long history within the Old Testament and this helps us understand what Paul meant. For although Paul's life was changed completely when he met the Lord on the Damascus Road, his substantial learning and scholarship as a Pharisee (see Phil 3:5) meant that he was uniquely placed to make connections between the Old and the New Testaments. He was therefore able to explain how the 'Gospel of God' (meaning God's great plan of Salvation) was fulfilled in the 'Gospel of Jesus' (meaning the ministry of Jesus through His death and resurrection).

It is hardly worth arguing too much over whether the word 'servant' or 'slave' best fits what Paul had to say about himself (see above), for most of the great Old Testament figures used by God to guide His people at critical times in their history were also called 'servants', and using a Hebrew word that can also mean 'slave'! Abraham (Gen 26:34), Moses (Ex 4:10), David (2 Sam 3:18), and Solomon (1 Kings 8:53), for example. The word 'servant' was also used in prophetic writing for the whole of God's people, chosen by Him to bring 'light' to the world (Isaiah 42:1-7 etc.). Most of these great characters were also 'called', for example, Moses (Ex 3:1-15) and the great prophets such as Jeremiah (Jer 1:1-10); so these terms placed Paul firmly within the historic line of people specially chosen by God to reveal His salvation to the world.

Paul knew that by claiming to stand in this heritage, he therefore bore a great responsibility; but in general, it was no more than that placed upon all God's people, charged with the revelation of God's light to the whole world. Within this universal task, however, God 'set aside' those for whom he had special work, and Paul's distinct calling was that of being an 'apostle', which means someone with a special mission. We will discover later what Paul's special mission was (1:5,6), but it was part of Paul's testimony that the power of God to build the early church did not rest exclusively on the twelve disciples (often referred to as 'the twelve apostles'). Being an apostle was a matter of God's call, of accepting what it would mean to be set aside for that role, and doing it with the essential Scriptural characteristic of 'service'.

### ***The 'Gospel of God'***

Paul said openly that the Gospel he preached was no new religious phenomenon. There was great interest in those days in 'something new' (see Acts 17:15f.), but Paul knew such a quest was irrelevant; and it remains so today. The truth of God must be consistent throughout history, or it is not truth about God at all. In order to quash all speculation, he firmly placed the Gospel he preached within the Jewish traditions of God's revelation through the Old Testament (1:2).

However, Paul's preaching was not in the Old Testament tradition people might have expected from someone trained as a Pharisee. In those days, Judaism was firmly rooted in the laws given to Moses and their interpretation by the main Jewish teachers who were largely Pharisees. However, Paul knew enough about the teaching of Jesus to know that He justified his actions by appealing to the prophets (usually Isaiah, e.g. Matt 13:14, 15:7). By saying about the Gospel that it 'was previously promised through His prophets' (1:2), Paul confirmed this dramatic shift in how we are to read the Old Testament. God's eternal plan of salvation was to be found through the prophetic words of those who realised that God would send his chosen servant (Isaiah 53); a Messiah who would reveal God to the world.

### ***The Saviour***

Paul then announced that this Messiah was God's Son (1:3), and described him in three carefully constructed phrases, each of which tell us something deeply important about Jesus. Firstly, he described his humanity by saying that His 'natural descent was from David' (1:3), and this placed him in the prophetic tradition of which he had just spoken. It was also the same basic description of Jesus' humanity made by the Gospel writers Matthew (Matt 1:1-17) and Luke (Luke 3:23-38). The second phrase recalled Jesus' baptism, when the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus in power to enable Him to fulfil the ministry God had given Him; in the words of Paul 'designated Son of God in power by the Holy Spirit' (1:3). The third phrase honoured the fulfilment of Jesus' ministry by which the Gospel work of God has been completed and which gave Jesus the right to be called the 'Christ', the 'Anointed One' of Israel; 'because of the resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord'.

This last phrase has one other special feature that is often missed, largely because when we read the passage, we see familiar words. Paul calls Jesus 'our Lord'. Now, whilst we are used to hearing these words today, it was a remarkable thing for them to be said in the early days of the church. The word 'Lord' was spoken by Jewish in place of the sacred 'name' of God as written in the Old Testament; this was because the name of God 'JHWH' was regarded as so holy it could not be said for fear of death, and the name 'Lord' was used in its place. So by using this term, Paul claimed that in terms of His earthly work and ministry, Jesus was indeed the 'Son of God'. He had risen, ascended and returned to the Father; He was divine, and was part of the very make up and nature of God.

Throughout His ministry, people asked Jesus whether He was the 'Son of God', and the only answer Jesus gave to this is His reply to Caiaphas on the night before he died; *'you have said so'* (Matt 26:64). Other evidence for belief in Jesus as the Son of God comes in John's Gospel, where John confesses that it was written *'so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God'* (John 20:31). Paul, however, explained Jesus' divinity in his letter to the Romans using the power of argument and reason, and he began right at the beginning of the letter.

### ***The commission***

The glorious truth of Paul's call was, in his eyes, the fulfilment of God's eternal plan of Salvation, which was to make His love known to the whole world. This was not something that anyone could do of themselves, for they needed 'grace and apostleship'; in other words, they needed not just the call to this great mission, the 'apostleship', but also the godly qualities that would enable the task to be achieved. Furthermore, the great mission to which he and others were called was intended to bring about 'the obedience of faith', the true mark of God's new People who responded to the Gospel. These are key words for Paul, and we will find that they are central to His explanation of Christian faith throughout his letter.

Paul did not at this point claim an apostleship that was his own or a mission that was his to perform alone. The task of spreading the Gospel was one that was shared, and others were involved; he said 'through Him we have received ...' (1:5) speaking in the plural of others with whom he shared this task. We know from what Paul said about his ministry in other letters that some criticised Paul for the manner and style of his ministry (e.g. 2 Cor 10), and by saying this he sought to honour those, not himself, who had brought the Gospel to Rome. His desire to engage with the church in Rome is again emphasised in verse 6 where he talks of the fulfilment of the Gospel which 'includes you who are called to belong to Christ Jesus'.

### ***The Greeting***

Having introduced himself and explained the Gospel he preached in a powerfully condensed way, Paul formally greeted the people of the church in Rome with words that were warm and very similar to those he used in other letters (1:7). He combined two greetings, the Greek greeting 'grace', which implied generosity and favour, and the Hebrew greeting 'peace' ('Shalom') which spoke of happiness and contentment. Throughout the world, different peoples have always used different words by way of greeting, and the words used say a great deal about the intention of those who use them. Paul sought to be as open and friendly as possible to the church to which he wrote, because he wanted his letter to be received. He intended to write extensively about the Gospel he preached, and he knew this would be a substantial document. By offering this warm greeting, he hoped the church would accept all that he was about to say!

## Application

It is not relevant to speak of 'applying' this text, as if we can find something to do as a direct consequence of what it says. Because Romans is a substantial and powerful statement of belief, the challenge we will face throughout our study of the letter will be to think about what Paul says and then link this with our own faith in Jesus. Sometimes, we will find that what Paul says is profoundly challenging to our own beliefs, and at other time we will agree with him wholeheartedly and without further question. Nevertheless, we must not shirk the challenge of this letter and what it say, for it is now Scripture, and for us, it carries the weight of being God's Word.

As an introduction to a letter, this passage describes the Gospel of Salvation in a direct, straightforward and condensed manner, and this has much to teach us. We can all be challenged to explain our faith succinctly! Paul points out that the Gospel has its origins in God, and it is foretold in Scriptures through the prophets of the Old Testament. They were inspired by God, so their words must be consistent with what God did through Jesus. The Gospel is fulfilled in Jesus, a man filled with the Holy Spirit and declared 'Son of God' for His work as Messiah; but more than this, His death and resurrection proves to us that He is God. Because of this, Jesus is the heart of the Gospel we proclaim, which is designed by God to bring salvation to the world, and also 'the obedience of faith' amongst those people who believe in Him and believe the Gospel.

As long as we seek to apply these Gospel truths to our lives, then we remain connected to the long tradition of apostolic and Biblical faith in which we stand. Of course there is much more to come, and we will have to stay the course if we are to be helped to understand the extent and depths of the Gospel. As we read about it we will be challenged to the core.

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## Discipleship

### **Questions** (for use in groups)

1. Discuss what you think is being said by each of the three statements about Jesus in verses 3 and 4. Is this a sufficient explanation of the person of Jesus Christ?
2. What is an 'apostle'? Discuss what this passage of scripture says about the role of an apostle.
3. If you were a member of a church who had not heard much about Paul before, how would you receive his letter, having read the introduction?

### **Personal comments by author**

*Do you feel that you are involved in the proclamation of the Gospel as it is described by Paul in this passage of Scripture? Paul has a grand view of the Gospel; it is universal in its scope and it is all-important. Every disciple faces the challenge to have as big a picture of the Gospel as this and more so, for our knowledge of the Universe today is so much bigger than Paul's was centuries ago. Unless we consider the challenge of Christ as something bigger than anything else we know, then we have not yet grasped the full extent of God's vision for this world.*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *Try writing a letter in which you intend to tell some Christian people elsewhere in the world what you believe about Jesus Christ. How would you start the letter? Does Paul's method of starting give us a good example, or should we do it differently today?*
- *Fast and pray for other Christians around the world who long to know more of the Gospel, but because of repression and troubles, they are not at liberty to study openly or discuss their beliefs in an open way.*

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## Final Prayer

Thank You, heavenly Father, for the call that You have placed upon our lives. You have loved us, given us Your love, and revealed Your truth to us; help us therefore to give you the best of our time and energy so that we may be used in Your service. All praise to You, heavenly Father. AMEN

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