

If you wanted to learn something about what the Bible says, where would you turn? If you wanted to learn more about creation, for example, you might turn to the book of Genesis to learn what God has to say about the creation of the world. And if you wanted to learn something more about the end times, you'd turn to the book of Revelation to understand what God says is going to come. But what if you wanted to understand something more about the Gospel? About what it is and what it means for us today? Where would you turn?

Out of all of the books in the Bible, there is no book probably more important or more clear about what the Gospel is than the book of Romans. In fact, it is so clear and so important that it has changed church history on more than one occasion. Augustine, for example, even before he was a Christian, was once sitting in a garden. And he heard a child calling out to him: "Take up and read. Take up and read." And so he went into his house, and he opened up a book to the book of Romans. And because of what he read in this book, he became a Christian on that day, and became one of the most important figures in the history of the church. So yes, the book of Romans is that important. Or you think also of Martin Luther, who was once preaching and teaching and reading the book of Romans. And because of what he was reading, he came to the understanding of what God meant by justification by faith. So it's not too much to say that because of the book of Romans, the Reformation happened, and we are here today because of it. Or even somebody like John Wesley, who at a very famous incident at Aldersgate, went to a Bible study on the book of Romans. And as he heard Luther's preface to the book, he said that he felt his heart was "strangely warmed," that he was a changed man. And he left that day completely different, a dedicated Christian, and went on to become one of the most important figures in the history of the church. So yes, the book of Romans is an important book for learning about what the Gospel is. It's a book that we should pay attention to and listen to what it has to say.

And so the first thing to do in a book like this--or for any book, for that matter--is to get the big picture, to get the overview of the entire book. Because once we have the big picture, that helps us to understand all the little pieces on the inside too. And to get the big picture, we have to ask a few questions. Questions like: "What's the purpose of this book? Why was it written? What's the goal?" And these kinds of questions will help us to get that big picture. And thankfully, Paul helps us to do this right away in this reading, what we heard this evening. Because the first seven verses of this book are not just the beginning of the book. They're also a picture of everything that he's about to say, a complete overview of the major themes of the book. So by studying these verses closely, we will be prepared to study the book as a whole.

And so these first seven verses are actually just one sentence, both in English and in Greek. And I know that that can be kind of hard to take in all at once. So we need to break it down a little bit to get to the basic heart of the sentence. And that is: "Paul . . . to all those in Rome." And already we have here the reason why Paul is writing. He wants to write a letter to these Christians who live in the city of Rome. "Why?" we might ask. "Why is he writing this letter?" To introduce himself. Because we learn later on in the book of Romans that he's never been here before. He had nothing to do with this church. He didn't found it. He was never its pastor. Nothing. In fact, they've been Christians longer than he has. Because we learn in Acts that some visitors from Rome were at Pentecost, where they heard about Jesus and then went home and started the church back in Rome. So Paul wants to introduce himself to these Christians he's never met, and

many of whom have been Christians longer than he has. The reason for that is because he intends to go through Rome on his way further west, so he wants to stop and visit with them for a while. And so the purpose of this letter, then, is to tell them something about who he is and also something about the message he has come to proclaim.

And so let's break these verses up a little bit so that we understand what he's trying to say in this one long sentence. Verse 1: "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God." So right away, Paul has introduced himself in three different ways. The first thing he says is "I am a servant of Christ Jesus." You can even translate that as "I am a slave of Christ Jesus." And what he means by this is that he's not his own man. He's not coming to them because he just wants to. He's not coming to them because he just felt like it. He's a man under authority, one who has to listen to somebody else. And that somebody else is Jesus Christ.

But he's not just a slave, he says. He is also called to be an apostle, which means that he has been sent by God to speak for him. Paul has authority from God himself. And so the Romans--and we, for that matter--should listen to him. Because whatever Paul says is what God says, and these are the very words of the living Lord.

But Paul is also set apart, he says, for the gospel of God. "Set apart": he is dedicated to this Gospel. It's not just one part of his personality or just one small part of his life. Everything about him is the Gospel. In fact, God, we learn in other epistles, had called Paul even before he was born to do what he was now doing, to bring this message to all the nations. So in this way, Paul has already said something about himself as he introduces himself to the Romans.

But now in the second verse, he begins to describe what he means by the Gospel. So he said something about himself. Now he's going to say something about the message he has been sent to proclaim. So verse 2: "Which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son." So this message is nothing new, Paul says. He's saying: "I didn't make it up. I didn't come up with it. This has been the message from the very beginning. The Bible has always been about Jesus." And that was important, because the Jews were saying, "No, it's never been about Jesus. This has never been about anything that Paul is saying." But Paul says, "No, that's not the case. Even from the very beginning, it's all been about Jesus." In fact, if you go all the way back to Genesis chapter 3, right after Adam and Eve fell into sin, God promised that he was going to send the seed of the woman to crush the serpent's head. He promised them Jesus all the way back in Genesis. And time and time again throughout the Old Testament, God promised that Jesus would come. Sometimes repeating a promise, sometimes making a new promise, but always saying that Jesus would come to redeem his people. And that's exactly what has happened. And this is the message, Paul says, that he has been sent to proclaim: that Jesus is the promised one from long ago sent to save all people.

But now that he's said something about the Gospel, Paul goes on to say something about Jesus. Verses 3 and 4: "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." I know that this is all pretty dense. You've got to understand how much Paul is packing in here, but that's why we need to pay attention to it. What he has to say here about Jesus is a great deal. Because think about what he says. He says he is descended from

David. He is the promised king of Israel. Because God had promised long ago to David that one of his own sons would sit on his throne forever. And Jesus is that son. He is the king who has come just as God said that he would. But he is also born "according to the flesh," that he is human. A real man, fully human just like us, except without sin. So that in every way, it's not that he's just kind of human or not even human, but rather a person just like we are, so that he could become our Savior.

But he's not just a man, Paul says. He is also God. Because he was "declared to be the Son of God." You could say he was "proven" to be God. How? By his resurrection. Because when Jesus rose from the dead, he did what no ordinary man could. Because we certainly won't rise from the dead all on our own, and no one in the history of the world has risen from the dead on their own either. But Jesus has risen, and that proves that he is God. So Jesus is, Paul says, both God and man, the son of David and the Son of God, born like us, raised from the dead, and is now sitting as king forever. All of that has been packed into those two little verses!

But this Jesus, Paul says, has sent Paul to proclaim the Gospel. Verse 5: "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." So Paul is an apostle not because he chose to be, not because he took it for himself, or that he deserves to be. Paul as an apostle by grace, the same way that we are Christians by grace. And the mission that God has sent Paul on is "to bring about the obedience of faith," to bring others to know who Jesus is, so that they would then walk in obedience after him. Because we can't come to Jesus and stay the same as what we were before. If we believe in Jesus, we will follow after him, to do what he wants us to do and to live like him. In this way, you can already see the very end of the book where Paul talks about all of the things that this means for us as Christians. So you have here the entire overview of the book of Romans, all packed into these few verses.

And this gospel is also meant for all of us, including those who are in Rome. As he says in verses 6 and 7: "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." So in these verses, then, he has introduced himself, who he is and the message he has been sent to proclaim.

So what do we take away from this? What can we learn from this passage? At least two things. The first being that we see a lot of what Paul is going to talk about later in the book. Because think about all of the things that he's just said. He's told us what the Gospel is. He's told us about God. He's told us who he is. He's even told us what this all means for us, for our salvation and for our living. And Paul is going to open all of that up as we go through the book of Romans. So even in this small part of the letter, Paul has given us so much to consider. Which goes to show us that we should always listen to what God has to say, even in those parts of the Bible that maybe don't seem all that interesting to us. Maybe we're not really sure how they apply or what it means for us. But honestly, this is God's Word! Everything has been written for our benefit. Everything has been written for our good. And even if we can't understand how it's important, we shouldn't just gloss over it. We should listen to it and consider what it has to say.

And the other thing we should learn from this is that Paul, when he talks about himself, talks about God. Think about that. He says, "God is my Master." He says, "God has called me." He says, "God has set me apart." God promised all these things. He even talks about who Jesus is. In fact, in introducing himself, he talks far more about who God is than he does about himself. And that's important, because Paul has made Christ the very center of who he is, of how he thinks, of how he lives, and how he acts. Which should lead us to ask about ourselves: is Christ the center of our lives? When we introduce ourselves to somebody else, do we tell them about who we are as Christians? Or do we keep it apart, as separate, as if being a Christian was just one little part of who we are? No, Christians, we are who we are today because of what God has done. Being a Christian is at the very heart of our identity. Everything else flows out from that. So we should not be afraid to tell others about Jesus. We should not be afraid of what might happen if we say that we are Christians, or if we're going to offend somebody if we bring up Jesus. Rather, we should be bold like Paul and say that we are Christians, because this is who God has made us to be. Let us not make it a secret that we are in Jesus and let everyone know about him!

And so Paul is going to continue his introduction in the next section, and he'll go on to unpack everything that we've talked about tonight. And I know that it's all densely packed together. But we have a good starting point for the book of Romans as a whole. Because the message that Paul brings to us is that God has sent him to proclaim the Gospel of Christ, and that's good news for all the nations and also for us! So let us pay close attention, then, to what he has to say as we go through this book.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, we thank you for your Son, Jesus Christ, whom you have sent into the world to be our Savior. Help us always to listen to him, because he is our life. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.