

## **The Gospel Romans 1:1-6, 16-17**

### **Introduction**

This first lesson will focus on only a few verses of the first chapter for the sake of time. A brief description of the purpose for Paul's letter would be in order at the beginning of the class. This first section of Romans is an introduction to the major themes of the letter. Those themes include: the faithfulness of God, the universal scope of the gospel, Paul's mission to the Gentiles, the role of Jesus in God's good news, and the place of faith in God's purposes.

### **Paul**

Identifying himself as a servant of God would have been very common for a faithful Jew who saw his/her relationship with God as that of a servant. From a Jewish perspective, it is the idea of being a servant of Jesus that stands out. This was not a position that all Jews had been willing to acknowledge. It would have been a bold statement to the Greek world as well. They believed strongly in a man's freedom and would have seen the idea of being a slave even to a god as reprehensible.

Although Paul always began proclaiming the gospel in the synagogues in every town he visited, he saw his primary mission as one having been set apart to reach the Gentile world (1:5). Dunn (pg. 8) suggests that Paul may have had Isaiah 49:1-8 in mind when he referred to himself as one called to be a messenger. That text is a servant passage that speaks of one who was called by God and whose mission included the "nations" (Gentile world). Not only would this passage identify Jesus as that servant, Paul might have seen his mission through the eyes of this text as a representative of Israel's call to be a light to the nations.

### **The Gospel Concerning God's Son: 1:1-6**

The source of the good news of redemption for the world is God. God is personally involved in redeeming His world. This gospel was not some new thought of God's, but was a fulfillment of God's promises for which Jews had waited for centuries.

The one through whom the promises were fulfilled is Jesus. Jesus is seen as the royal Messiah in the phrase, "**descendent of David.**" The idea of royal Messiah may also be seen in verse one where Paul's wording is "Christ Jesus" ("Christ" comes first in the text). The word "Christ" was the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew "Messiah." Therefore it might better read, "Messiah Jesus." God had made a promise to king David that his sons would also have the right to the throne of God's kingdom on earth (1 Samuel 7; Psalm 89). David and his descendents who sat on the throne were spoken of as "sons of God." This role has to do with his physical relationship to David and was the great hope for which the Jews longed, but this was not the extent of Paul's understanding of Jesus.

The next description of Jesus is, "**appointed Son of God in power.**" This is a different translation than is found in the NIV or NRSV. It is sometimes commonly thought from the more popular translation that the resurrection was a declaration of Jesus being the Son of God. It is also commonly thought that the first description (son

of David) declares his human nature and this description declares his pre-existent divine nature. Although those concepts are true about Jesus and the resurrection, that is not Paul's meaning here.

Rather than the word "declared," a better translation is that Jesus was "appointed" to a position. And, rather than "*with* power," the next phrase should read "*in* power." Being the son of David characterized his physical existence and his role of Jewish Messiah. While being the descendent of David on earth was important in the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel, the gospel transcends the boundaries of Judaism. God's purpose of redeeming the cosmos, not just the Jew, required more than a mere Jewish Messiah. The idea of "appointed" and "in power" speaks of a glorified and powerful role that was given to Jesus at the resurrection. "In power" was presumably important to Paul. It indicated that Jesus' divine sonship had been 'upgraded' or 'enhanced' by the resurrection, so that he shared more fully in the very power of God, not simply in status (at God's right hand), but in 'executive authority' (Dunn, pg. 14)." Cranfield (pg. 7) describes it this way, "Paul is affirming by it (the resurrection) the One who has always been God's Son but was brought by his human birth into a relationship with David as far as his human nature is concerned, was appointed the glorious Son-of-God-in-power from the time of His resurrection - a fact which is attested by the present sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in believers ("according the spirit of holiness")." This is the glory Jesus spoke about in John 16:14 and 17:1, 5. Jesus is Lord with power and authority over creation. The scope of "resurrection" in verse four is not limited to Jesus' resurrection. The word "dead" is in the plural form suggesting the belief that there is another resurrection coming. Jesus was just the first fruits.

Proclaiming Jesus as Lord was a huge statement when said in the shadow of Caesar's palace in Rome. Caesar was believed to be the lord and provider of blessings to Rome. "Son of God" was not only used among Jews for their kings, it was also used by nations around Israel to describe their kings or in Egypt's case to describe the Pharaoh. And it was used to speak of Caesar. Paul's descriptions of Jesus were a direct attack against Rome's belief that Caesar was Lord and savior (provider of blessings). Psalm 2 is a Royal Psalm that was read at the coronation of Israel's kings. It speaks of the nations conspiring against Yahweh and His king. Yahweh laughs at their feeble attempts to rebel against His anointed king. In the midst of their rebellion Yahweh proclaims of his anointed, "you are my son; today I have begotten you." This is quoted in Acts 13:3 by Paul when proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus. It is Jesus who is "King of kings and Lord of lords," not Caesar.

The last two verses describe the focus of Paul's ministry. He was appointed by God to take the gospel to the Gentiles. The phrase, "including yourselves" is an indication that the letter was primarily written to Gentile Christians. Paul ended this letter with the same thought (Romans 16:26).

**"Obedience of faith"** is an important theme in Romans. Not only is it stated here, Paul ends his letter with the same phrase (16:26). "Obedience" carries the idea of "hear," "listen," "heed." The context of hearing in scripture is that of giving heed to the words of God that leads to a life of trusting obedience. The root of the Greek word here is the same word Jesus used in Matthew 11:15 and 13:9 when he said, "Let every one with ears listen." Another way to translate this phrase is "obedience which stems from

faith.” Paul’s objective with the Gentile world was to get them to change allegiance from the pagan gods to the one true God (1 Thess. 1:9). Having trust (faith) in God changes one’s allegiance from self, the world, etc. and results in a life that is lived for the purpose of giving allegiance to God. Faithful obedience is not for the purpose of earning or meriting favor with God, it is the natural response of faith.

The phrase “**for the sake of his name**” is an important phrase that is often overlooked. God’s name speaks of His nature and the way He relates to the world. The name of God was very important in the Exodus story both in the calling of Moses (Exodus 3:13ff) when Moses asks “What is your name?” and in a very pivotal event at Mt. Sinai when it appeared Israel stood at the brink of annihilation due to their rebellion. God proclaimed more definitively what His name (His nature) meant to Israel (Exodus 34:5ff). His self-proclaimed name (nature and way of relating to the world) is “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness ... .” Paul lived out his God-given calling for the sake of God’s own character.

### *To Sum It Up*

Paul had a special mission to the Gentile world. His goal was to bring Gentiles to a faith that would lead them to change their allegiance from the world and pagan gods to the one true God (lead them to obedience).

Jesus was special to the Jew because he was the royal Messiah, the son of David. The Jews longed for God’s fulfillment of His promise of sending them the Messiah. But God’s purpose for Jesus had a larger scope. In the resurrection Jesus was appointed to a glorious place of power and authority over the whole cosmos. God fulfilled the promise to Abraham of Genesis 12, to bless all the nations of the world. Therefore, Jesus is Lord. Caesar is not!

### **The Faithfulness of God: 1:16-17**

The faithfulness of God is the overarching theme of Romans. Paul was not ashamed (did not act on “false assumption or misplaced confidence”: Dunn, pg 38) of the gospel. He did not believe some outside force or enemy could in any way defeat his God-given mission. The word we translate “salvation” was a Christian term that was new to Paul’s world. It did not have the modern image of a state of bliss after death. The gospel (Jesus’ death/burial/resurrection) was the power of God that defeated all of the destructive powers that had held humanity captive and brought destruction to the cosmos. God is the rescuer of humanity from the oppression of sin and resulting death and the One who transforms lives.

This powerful deliverance is not limited in scope. It is for “**everyone who has faith.**” The word “faith” is in the present tense signifying that this is not just about an initial response of faith but a “continuing orientation and motivation for life (Dunn, pg. 40).” Certainly, the Jews had a place of priority in God’s saving purpose. A point the Gentiles forgot, as will be seen later in the letter. On the other hand, Jews needed to understand that the Gentile world is able to realize the same covenant partnership with God as the Jew upon the same basis, faith.

The previous comments give opportunity to consider a very practical application of God deliverance of humanity from the oppression and consequences of sin. An issue in the church in Rome was the arrogance that different groups held concerning their

relationship with God and a resulting attitude of arrogance toward others. Divisions and resentment between groups revolving around ethnicity, economic status, political status, gender, etc. dominated the Roman world. God's redemption of the world includes transformed lives that break down such barriers and create harmony.

The opening phrase of verse 17 has the meaning as seen in the document on "righteousness." This is not a righteousness *from* God. It is the **righteousness of God**. It is God's own covenant faithfulness (his relation-restoring love or saving deed) of rescuing the world from the oppression of sin through Jesus. Although there was some revelation of God's covenant faithfulness in the OT, His covenant faithfulness was not fully revealed until the world saw the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The word "revealed" is in the present tense indicating that the revealing of the gospel is an ongoing process.

The phrase the NRSV translates "**through faith for faith**" and the NIV translates "by faith from first to last" is one of the more difficult and odd Greek phrases in the Bible. Most modern translations interpret this to speak of the progression of faith in a person's life. There may be an intended progression "from" (*ek*) something "to" (*eis*) something. Literally the phrase reads, "out of faith into faith." This might give the picture of something that moves out from its original source and then returns to its original source.

Since the statement "the righteousness of God is revealed" precedes this phrase, it seems most natural to understand "out of faith" refers to God's faithfulness. God is the starting point. This second "faith" is more difficult to determine. Both Jesus' faithfulness and man's faith/faithfulness are possible. Then there is the possibility that this is an expression intended to communicate that it begins and ends with God's faithfulness. If the context of this section as well as the context of Romans is intended to help us here, the following quote from Habakkuk might be the key to understanding "into faith."

Habakkuk is a book of woe concerning Israel. Due to their unfaithfulness (idolatry and general unfaithfulness to the covenant), God was sending the Babylonians against Judea and Jerusalem. Israel was puzzled as to what God was doing in bringing Babylon against them. In the midst of the description of Israel's sin and coming destruction, God states that there will be life. Although the word "faith" is seen as referring to both Israel's trust in God and God's faithfulness in the differing MT and LXX translations, the meaning is the same. Those who trust (are faithful) in God's faithfulness will live.

The quote from Habakkuk is another difficult text to translate, primarily because there are different translations of the text in the Hebrew Masoretic text (MT) and in the Greek Septuagint (LXX). The MT and Greek translations other than the LXX reads, "the righteous (man/one) by *his* faithfulness shall live." The LXX reads, "**the righteous one out of my (God) faith(fulness) shall live.**" The Habakkuk text is also quoted in Hebrews 10:38 which reads, "my righteous one out of faith/faithfulness shall live." It needs to be understood that OT texts that may not originally have been seen as having Messianic meaning came to be seen as Messianic later in Israel's history.

It is held by a number of scholars that the Habakkuk text came to be seen as a Messianic text and that Paul used it in this way. It seems certain that the Hebrew writer used it as a Messianic text. The fact that Jesus is spoken of as the "Righteous One" three times in Acts (3:14; 7:52; 22:14), in Luke 23:47, in James 5:6, and in 1 John 2:1

plays a role in our understanding of this text in Romans. Putting all this together may point to Jesus being the “Righteous One” in Romans 1:17. The text would then read, “The Righteous One will live [i.e., be raised from the dead] based on his [i.e., God’s] faithfulness.” This would then refer back to the statement in 1:4 that Jesus was appointed Son of God in power ... by the resurrection.”

Going back to the phrase “out of faith into faith,” the above discussion could lead to translating this phrase something like, “based on *God’s* faithful response to *Jesus’* faithful obedience.” Paul certainly could have stated the phrase “out of faith into faith” more clearly. It may be that Paul left it ambiguous on purpose in order to cause them to be as confused as we are expecting they would question him about it when he arrived in Rome.

### *To Sum It Up*

I like much of the following quote from N.T. Wright (pg. 426), although his last phrase is totally dependent upon how the phrase “out of faith into faith” is to be understood. Wright sees the Habakkuk quote as referring to the human response of faith.

“He (Paul) is not ashamed of the gospel, because it is God’s power to salvation for all believers; because, faced with a world in idolatry and ruin, God’s righteousness is revealed in the gospel, a matter of divine faithfulness reaching down and calling out the response of human faithfulness.”