

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

THE GOSPEL OF GOD: DESCRIBED

Romans 1:2-4

By

Steven J. Cole

July 18, 2010

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Romans, Lesson 2

The Gospel of God: Described Romans 1:2-4

The late, great British preacher, Martyn Lloyd-Jones opened a sermon on Paul's phrase, "the gospel of God," by stating his fear that we are often so familiar with certain words, such as "gospel," or so academic in our approach to them, that we are not thrilled and moved to the depths of our being by the wonder of it all (*Romans: the Gospel of God* [Zondervan], p. 55). The gospel of God is the theme of Romans and Paul describes it here (1:2-4). I hope that God uses these verses to move us to deeper love for Him.

Romans 1:1-7 is one long and difficult to diagram sentence in the Greek text. Paul begins by identifying himself (1:1); then he describes what he calls "the gospel of God" (1:2-4); next he explains how that gospel goes to the nations (Gentiles) through Paul's apostleship (1:5-6); and, finally (1:7), he greets the saints in Rome. We'll only be able to cover verses 2-4 in this message.

Last week we saw (1:1) that the gospel comes to us from God. Paul did not make it up. God originated the gospel. And the gospel is all about God. It tells us how we can be rightly related to Him through His eternal Son, whom He sent. To continue, Paul shows:

The gospel of God was promised in the Scriptures
and it centers in God's Son.

1. The gospel of God was promised beforehand through God's prophets in the holy Scriptures (1:2).

Why does Paul begin by stating that the gospel of God was that "which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures"? It's because he wants to show that he didn't make up the gospel. It wasn't Paul's idea. Rather, it comes to us right out of the Old Testament, which he refers to as the "holy Scriptures."

God promised the gospel in prototype in Genesis 3:15, right after the fall, when He said that the seed of the woman would bruise the head of the serpent. The gospel was implicit in the Old Testament sacrificial system, revealed most thoroughly to Moses but, I believe, even revealed from the outset to Cain and Abel. The

wages of our sin is death, but God graciously would accept the blood sacrifice of an acceptable substitute. We see it again in type when God told Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac. God intervened, of course, to provide the ram instead of Isaac. But He was showing what He would literally do by sending His own Son as the necessary offering for our sins. As Isaiah 53 makes plain, Jesus is the lamb of God who was wounded for our transgressions.

The record of Paul's missionary journeys in the Book of Acts shows that when he was speaking to the Jews, he reasoned with them *from the Scriptures*, trying to show that Jesus is the promised Messiah. For example, in Acts 13, after summarizing Old Testament history down to David (13:16-22), he concludes (Acts 13:23), "From the descendants of this man, according to promise, God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus." In Acts 17:2-3, we read with reference to Paul's visit to Thessalonica, "And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.'" (See, also, Acts 9:22; 28:23). It is important to see that the apostles did not make up the gospel. It comes to us from God's promises through His prophets as revealed in all of the Old Testament.

Paul may have used the word "holy" to describe the Scriptures because some of his critics accused him of promoting licentiousness under the banner of grace (3:8; 6:1). They said that Paul set aside the Law of Moses and therefore opened the door for people to live as they pleased. Paul wants us to know that he viewed the Scriptures as holy because they help us lead holy lives. Also, the Scriptures are holy because they come to us from the holy God through His prophets. Paul had the highest regard for the Scriptures. Paul's message, the gospel of God, was in line with and in fulfillment of the holy Scriptures. Rather than nullifying the Scriptures, he saw Jesus as fulfilling them (Rom. 3:31; 8:4).

Two other thoughts here: First, the word "Scriptures" means, "the writings." God saw fit to have the prophets write down His revelation for their own and succeeding generations to read. He could have sent angels to every language group in every generation around the world to communicate His truth. Frankly, it would have

been a lot easier than sending people who have to struggle to learn those languages and translate the Bible into them. But God chose to reveal Himself through the written Word. Wherever that written Word has gone, cultures have been transformed as people learned to read the Word of God and He opened their minds to its truths.

We tend to take it for granted that we have the entire Bible in our mother tongue. But do we devour it and treasure it as God's holy Word to us? Do we pore over it, seeking to know the Creator through the means He has revealed Himself to us? If you don't have a plan for reading through God's Word regularly, I encourage you to begin now.

Second, God's promise in the Old Testament to send the Savior is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Although from the human perspective, it took many centuries—400 years from the prophet Malachi to the birth of Jesus—God always keeps His promises in His time. No doubt there were scoffers then, as there are now, who mocked, "Where is the promise of the Savior?" But there were those, like the godly Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:25-38), who were waiting expectantly for God to keep His promise. Although you may be tempted to despair at times, wondering, "Where is the promise of His coming?" (2 Pet. 3:4) persevere in faith. God always keeps His promises. Jesus is coming to judge this evil world and to bring full redemption to His people.

2. The gospel of God centers in the person of God's Son (1:3-4).

Jesus is the center of the good news. As I emphasized in our recent series on evangelism, one basic principle when you're sharing the gospel is to keep bringing the discussion back to the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus asked the disciples (Matt. 16:15), "But who do you say that I am?" *That* is the crucial question! If Jesus is who He claimed to be and who the Scriptures present Him to be, then He is Lord of all and we must bow before Him. In succinct form, Paul shows three things about Jesus: He is God's eternal Son; He was born of the seed of David according to the flesh; and, He is now resurrected from the dead and exalted to the place of power and glory.

A. God's Son existed eternally before He was born (1:3a).

Paul writes (1:3), “concerning His Son, who was born” In Romans 8:3, Paul says that God sent “His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin.” So Jesus was God’s Son eternally *before* He was born of the virgin Mary. He shared the glory of the Father before the world existed (John 17:5). Jesus often spoke of the Father sending Him into this world (I counted 34 times in John; see John 4:34; 5:23, 24, 30, 36, 37-38).

So Jesus was not a normal man, who became the Son of God when the Holy Spirit came upon Him. God didn’t adopt Jesus as His Son at His baptism. Rather, He is the eternal Son of God, sent by the Father, who took on human flesh in the incarnation, and who has returned to the right hand of the Father to await the day of His glorious coming. In other words, Jesus is fully God and fully man. Any teaching that denies either Jesus’ full deity or full humanity is heresy. He is God’s unique Son, the eternal second person of the Trinity. So when the New Testament writers refer to Jesus as God’s Son, they are affirming His deity (see John 5:18).

Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*ibid.*, pp. 98-99) makes the point that you can have the teachings of Buddhism without the person of Buddha. He is not essential to that religion. The same can be said of all the world’s religions, except Christianity. Christianity is not just the teachings of Jesus. Rather, Christianity *is* Jesus Christ! You can’t just take His teachings and set Him aside. To be a Christian is to embrace and believe in the person of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. Any view that demotes Him from being God’s eternal Son, the second person of the Trinity, is not biblical Christianity.

B. God’s Son was born of the seed of David according to the flesh (1:3b).

This phrase links back to verse 2, showing that Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s promises through His prophets in the holy Scriptures. God promised David that one of his descendants would sit on his throne forever (2 Sam. 7:12-13; see Isa. 11:1; Jer. 23:5-6). Israel’s Messiah and Savior would be of the seed of David. But, David’s line on the throne over Israel ceased to exist at the time of the Babylonian captivity, 600 years before Christ.

But the New Testament writers clearly affirm that Jesus was born of the lineage of David (Matt. 1:1; 20:30-31; 21:9, 15; Luke

1:27, 32, 69; 2:4; 3:23-31; Acts 2:30; 13:22, 23, 32-34; Rom. 15:12; 2 Tim. 2:8; Rev. 5:5; 22:16). (See my sermon, "The Genealogy of Jesus," on Luke 3:23-38.) Near the very end of Revelation (22:16), Jesus testifies to John, "I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." Thus Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, the son of David, who fulfills God's promises to Israel.

This means that Jesus is not only fully God; He also is fully human. He shares in our human nature, except for our sinfulness (Gal. 4:4; Heb. 4:15). Thus Jesus could bear the penalty for our sins, since He had no sins of His own. He could be the perfect high priest, who offered Himself for human sins (Heb. 2:14-18). He can sympathize with our weaknesses, which encourages us to come to Him when we are tried and tempted. While I am not aware of any current serious threat to the Christian faith from those who deny Jesus' full humanity, this was the battlefield of the early church. Even in the New Testament, the apostle John emphasizes this truth (John 1:14; 1 John 1:1; 4:2-3). Jesus was not an angelic or spirit being who seemed to be a man. He was a real man, born physically to Mary, of the lineage of David, according to the flesh.

This also means that Jesus is coming again to reign in power and glory from David's throne. The Jews of Jesus' day and down through history since then rejected Jesus because He did not conquer Israel's enemies and set up His earthly kingdom. Instead, Caesar's government crucified Him. How could a crucified Man be the Savior promised to reign on David's throne?

But Jesus Himself, after His resurrection, told the men from Emmaus (Luke 24:26), "Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?" Then Luke reports (24:27), "Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures." (Paul uses the same line of argument in Acts 13:23-39.) While the Book of Revelation has much in it that is difficult to understand, the main idea is pretty clear: The risen Lord Jesus Christ is coming again in power and glory to judge the earth and to reign in righteousness. You'd better be on His side before He comes!

Thus by referring to "God's Son," Paul speaks of Jesus' pre-incarnate glory as the eternal Son of God. By referring to Jesus as

being “born of a descendant of David according to the flesh,” he looks at His earthly humility, born of the virgin Mary in the humble stable. As a man, He was rejected by Israel and crucified by the proud Jewish leaders. Then Paul goes back to Jesus’ glory:

- C. God’s Son was appointed to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness (1:4a, b).

Verse 4 has some difficult interpretive issues, which I’ll try to explain. First, the word “declared” is not translated that way anywhere else in the New Testament. It means, “appointed” or “determined” or “fixed” (Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* [Baker], p. 42; Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], pp. 47-48). This does not mean that Jesus became God’s Son through His resurrection or that He was shown to be at the resurrection what He was all along. Rather, He was elevated to a new level of power as the Son of God by virtue of His resurrection, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow (Phil. 2:9-11; see Schreiner, p. 42, and Moo, pp. 48-49). In other words, in view of the resurrection, Jesus went from being the eternal Son as Messiah (v. 3) to the eternal Son as Messiah and powerful, reigning Lord (v. 4; Moo, *ibid.*).

The other difficult question is what is the meaning of, “according to the Spirit of holiness,” which stands in contrast to “according to the flesh” in verse 3? Some argue that it refers to Jesus’ divine nature, in contrast to His human nature (v. 3). Or, some say that it refers to Jesus’ holy, obedient human spirit as He lived always to do the Father’s will. A third view is that it refers to the Holy Spirit’s role in raising Jesus from the dead. A fourth view is that it refers to the sending of the Holy Spirit after Jesus’ exaltation.

Although good men hold to each view for good reasons, the last view in combination with the third is probably the best. Paul is looking at two phases in the ministry of Jesus. According to the flesh, as the descendant of David, Jesus lived in humility with His glory veiled during His earthly ministry. But by virtue of His resurrection from the dead and exaltation on high, Jesus inaugurated the new age of the Holy Spirit (Schreiner, pp. 43-44; Moo, p. 50; F. F. Bruce, *Romans* [IVP/ Eerdmans], p. 69). Also, implicit in the phrase, “resurrection from the dead,” is that Jesus’ resurrection

guarantees our future resurrection (as Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 15 and Roman 8:11).

It's interesting that in this opening description of the gospel, Paul does not explicitly mention Christ's death, although it is implicit in mentioning His resurrection. Paul's emphasis seems to be on Christ's exaltation and glory. As Everett Harrison writes (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelein [Zondervan], 10:15), "It was the infinite worth of the Son that made his saving work possible."

Thus we've seen that the gospel of God centers in the person of His Son, who existed eternally, was born of the seed of David, and was appointed to be the Son of God with power by His resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness. Finally,

D. God's Son is Jesus Christ our Lord (1:4c).

This phrase sums up the first three points. "Jesus" refers to His humanity, that He was born of the lineage of David to the virgin Mary. Jesus was His earthly name, which means "Yahweh saves." The angel told Joseph before Jesus' birth (Matt. 1:21), "You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." Jesus did not come primarily to help you have a happy, fulfilled life or to reach your full potential. He came to save you from your sins. If you do not know Jesus as your Savior from sin and judgment, then you do not know Him at all.

"Christ" means "Messiah," or "Anointed One," and also points to Jesus as the descendant of David (Ps. 2:7-12; Ps. 110:1-2). He is uniquely God's promised Anointed One, who will reign on David's throne over God's people. As such, He fulfilled all of God's promises in the Old Testament. Paul uses "Christ" 379 times out of its 529 New Testament occurrences, including 65 times in Romans. It is because of Paul that "Christ" has become something of a name for our Lord (Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Apollos/Eerdmans], pp. 37-38).

"Lord" in Greek could be used as a polite term, like "sir." But it also could be used of God. It is the word used to translate the divine name, "Yahweh," in the Greek Old Testament. So when the early church adopted the confession, "Jesus is Lord," they clearly meant, "Jesus is the Lord *God*." Paul loved to use the complete

phrase, "Jesus Christ our Lord." He uses it 68 times, compared to only 19 in the rest of the New Testament (Morris, p. 48).

Matthew 22:41-42 records how Jesus asked His enemies whose son the Christ (Messiah) would be. They correctly answered, "The son of David." Then Jesus said (22:43-45), "Then how does David in the Spirit call Him 'Lord,' saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, until I put Your enemies beneath Your feet"'? If David then calls Him 'Lord,' how is He his son?" Jesus was showing them that their view of Messiah was inadequate. They merely thought of Him as David's son, but in Psalm 110, David calls Him "Lord," which means that He is God.

It is nonsense to think that somehow you can accept Jesus as your Savior, but not as your Lord. He is one being, "our Lord Jesus Christ." He never gives us the option of saying, "I'd like to try Jesus as my Savior, but I think I'll wait to make Him my Lord. I'd like to run my own life for a while."

While at times William Barclay has some strange views, he at least got it right when he said (cited by Alan Ross, from a sermon Barclay gave at the Round Church, Oxford, England, accessed at: <http://www.christianleadershipcenter.org/romans1.htm>):

It is now plain to see what a man ought to mean when he calls Jesus "Lord," or when he speaks of the "Lord Jesus" or of the "Lord Jesus Christ." When I call Jesus "Lord" I ought to mean that He is the absolute and undisputed owner and possessor of my life and that He is the Master whose servant and slave I must be all life long. When I call Jesus "Lord" it ought to mean that I think of Him as the Head of that great family in heaven and earth of which God is the Father and of which I through Him have become a member. When I call Jesus "Lord" it ought to mean that I think of Him as the help of the helpless and the guardian of those who have no other to protect them. When I call Jesus "Lord" it ought to mean that I look on Him as having absolute authority over all my life, all my thoughts, all my actions. When I call Jesus "Lord" it ought to mean that He is the King and Emperor to whom I owe and give my constant homage, allegiance, and loyalty. When I call Jesus "Lord" it ought to mean that for me He is the Divine One whom I must for ever worship and adore.

Conclusion

Is Jesus *your* Savior and Lord in that sense? The gospel of God is not primarily about you and how Jesus can help you find happiness and peace and fulfillment. Rather, it is from God and about God. It concerns His eternal Son, who humbled Himself to come from heaven and be born as a descendant of David according to the flesh. But after He offered Himself on the cross, God raised Him from the dead and He ascended into heaven. As Peter put it on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:36), "... know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified."

It ultimately doesn't come down to, "Can Jesus give me a happy life?" Rather, the crucial question is, "Who is Jesus?" Is He the eternal Son, risen from the dead, exalted as Lord? If so, then make sure that He is *your* Savior and Lord!

Application Questions

1. Why is the crucial question, "Who is Jesus?" rather than, "Will He make me happy?" How does this shape our witnessing?
2. Why is it important to see that the gospel was promised beforehand in the Scriptures? What difference does this make?
3. Some argue that you can accept Jesus as Savior without submitting to Him as Lord. Why is this wrong? What Scriptures would you use to counter this argument?
4. List some of the practical benefits that come from affirming both Jesus' deity and His humanity.

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