

# GOOD NEWS FOR ALL OF US

## WEEK TWO: Romans 15

### Romans Good News for All of Us: A Brief Introduction

Paul's epistle to the Romans is the most influential of his letters and has had an enormous impact on Christian theology and doctrine. Part of the reason is that it is the most systematic of Paul's letters; outlining as clearly as in any of his writings his understanding of the good news about Jesus. One consequence has been that Romans has been treated like a systematic theology rather than as an occasional document; one written to address a specific pastoral occasion. Romans, like all of Paul's letters, has a concrete situation that he is wanting to address. Scholars agree that there is evidence of division in the Roman church. The upshot of this is that the doctrine which dominates the first two-thirds of the letter is less an overview of Paul's thought and more of a foundation for the exhortations in the final chapters. In order to better understand the doctrine, we will benefit from better understanding the pastoral issues that Paul is hoping to address. To that end, we will be working through Romans backwards; seeking clarity about the concerns Paul has and then exploring the doctrinal foundations.

I have included an outline of the series and a brief bibliography at the end of this document.

### Sermon Outline:

#### A Brief Overview of This Week's Sermon

**Key Text(s):** Romans 15:14-33

In this section Paul begins to close his letter, but he is far from finished teaching. Not only do these verses transition to the greetings (which, as we saw last week, were so much more than a list of hellos to give, but a demonstration of the unity of the gospel) but they also reprise the opening of the letter in 1:8-15. In both instances Paul includes a commendation of the Romans, a description of his ministry to the Gentiles, expresses a desire to visit them in order to mutually benefit each other, and refers to obligations. Then in 1:16-17 he outlines his thesis, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile." He goes on to say that both groups are saved by faith leading to righteousness. We have already bumped into these themes in the greetings.

More significant, however, is how Paul describes his ministry. Instead of speaking of himself as an apostle or reflecting on his commission by Jesus, he speaks of being a minister who has a priestly duty, given by God, in order that the Gentiles might become an acceptable offering. This harkens back to Romans 12:1-2 where the proper service of God is to offer ourselves as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. There is another allusion, however, that is more significant.

In Isaiah 61:6 the prophet says, "And you [the people of Israel] will be called priests of the LORD, you will be named ministers of our God. You will feed on the wealth of nations, and in their riches you will boast." This oracle, which opens with the words Jesus would use as his manifesto for ministry (see Luke 4:16-21), speaks of "the Servant". This figure

plays a prominent role in the latter part of Isaiah's work and is the one who will implement the plans and purposes of God. By alluding to this text Paul is linking his ministry to the Gentiles to the plans of God.

In the context of the early church, the inclusion of the Gentiles was a major fault line for division. Here Paul reminds his Jewish and Gentile hearers that his ministry wasn't his idea, but God's.

This is made all the clearer as Paul quote another Servant Song, this time in Isaiah 52:15. This is perhaps the most well-known of the Servant Songs and is clearly about Jesus. Yet Paul identifies so closely with Jesus that he sees himself in these words too! The verse Paul quote refers to the Servant sprinkling many nations (a priestly duty), and speaking to kings who will see what they had not been told and understand what they had not heard. [This also acts as a universal reversal of the problem faced by Isaiah – proclaiming the word to those who hear but never understand (see Isaiah 6:9-10). This is used by Jesus to explain why he speaks in parables too (see Mark 4: 10-12). This is such a rich tapestry!]

But Paul isn't done reflecting on Isaiah. It may very well be that his decision to go to Spain was driven both by wanting to minister where the gospel had not been proclaimed and because Tarshish (usually identified as a port city on the Spanish peninsula) is one of the places where Isaiah proclaims that the good news will make an impact (Isaiah 60:1-9). This text may also explain the significance of the offering that Paul is taking to Jerusalem.

This is more than an itinerary detail (though it does explain why he sent Phoebe rather than coming himself). It describes the years-long project Paul had spearheaded among the Gentile churches to raise funds for the poor Jewish believers in Jerusalem. This is, in a sense, the first fruits of the promises of Isaiah – the wealth of the nations is coming to Jerusalem in response to the light that has arisen on Israel!

But Paul really pushes on this issue. The offering is an eschatological sign (a sign of the fulfillment of God's plans) and demonstrates their unity as a family. IN 2 Corinthians 8-9 when Paul speaks of this offering he speaks almost exclusively of generosity. Here he speaks of obligations, the obligations of family. And when he asks for prayer that the offering might be "favourably received" he is hoping that the Jewish believers acknowledge and recognise God's work and plan in bringing the Gentiles into the family.

This section concludes with a call to join him in his struggle – the struggle for the gospel (see 1 Timothy 4:10) – by praying for him. The gospel is, indeed, the power to save and unite, but it requires us to struggle – in the love of the Spirit – to demonstrate and live that out.

Paul casts the inclusion of the Gentiles, as he does throughout the letter, as the plan of God. The tension they face to live out their unity has been placed there by God himself!

For us, there are two applications. First, to join in the struggle to pray for the unity of the church. Second, to remember that we too are sent by Jesus as the Father sent him. Paul's deep identification with Jesus' ministry as spoken of by Isaiah is confronting but a wonderful reminder that we have been sent to continue the work of God everywhere we go and in everything we do.

## Questions to Ask

1. Paul's reflection on the texts in Isaiah appear to have profoundly shaped his understanding of what it meant to follow Jesus. What are the texts that have shaped your own following?
2. Paul describes his work in priestly terms – offering the Gentiles as an acceptable sacrifice to God. What might it look like for us to see our everyday lives and relationships as “priestly service” to God?
3. The financial offering to Jerusalem is described as more than generosity, but as a family obligation and an eschatological sign of unity. How does thinking of our community of faith – with real obligations to one another – challenge our view of giving, serving, or sacrificing?
4. What does it mean for us to struggle for gospel-shaped unity today, and what specific prayers should we be committing to as a group?

## A Prayer to Pray

Pray for the unity of our community of faith (maybe praying some of the prayers you suggested in Q. 4). Pray that we would be a demonstration of the power of God to save everyone who believes and to unite them together in one family. Pray that we might rely on that power as we work out our salvation together.

## A Practice to Try

Write John 20:21 on a cue card or post-it note and place it somewhere you will see it every day. When you do, personalise it – “As the Father sent Jesus, he is sending me.”

## Readings to Read This Week

These are the oracles in Isaiah that speak of the “Servant”. Consider the ways these point to Jesus and the ways we are invited to participate in them.

Isaiah 42:1-4

Isaiah 49:1-6

Isaiah 50:4-11

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Isaiah 61:1-3

## A Mission Commitment to Reflect on

One of our values is to be Others-Focused. The unity of the body of Christ is a mission-critical matter. Putting others first, serving them, and seeking to demonstrate our love for one another are all things we can do to strengthen our unity.

## A GBC Initiative to Promote/Celebrate

Each week we will provide you with a key aspect of our community news that we would encourage you to remind your Life Group about.

1. We have scheduled a baptism service for March 15. If you have anyone in your Life Group who would like to explore baptism, encourage them to fill out an expression of interest or speak to one of the pastors.

## Good News For All of Us – Sermon Series outline

Please note that this is subject to change, but as it stands right now...

Term 1 (Romans 12-16)		Term 2 (Romans 9-11)		Term 3 (Romans 1-4)		Term 4 (Romans 5-8)	
15/2	Romans 16	7/6	9:1-29	23/8	TBD	25/10	TBD
22/2	15:14-33	14/6	9:30-10:21	30/8	TBD	1/11	TBD
1/3	14:1-15:13	21/6	11:1-24	6/9	TBD	8/11	TBD
8/3	12:14-13:7	28/6	11:25-36	13/9	TBD	15/11	TBD
15/3	Baptism			20/9	TBD	22/11	TBD
22/3	12:1-13					29/11	TBD
29/3	13:8-14						
5/4	Easter						

## A Brief Bibliography

The following commentaries have been utilised in the preparation and delivery of this series.

Bird, Michael, 2016, *Romans*, Story of God Bible Commentary, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Gorman, Michael J., 2022, *Romans: A theological and pastoral commentary*, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan.

McKnight, Scot, 2019, *Reading Romans Backwards: A Gospel of Peace in the Midst of Empire*, Baylor University Press, Waco, Texas.

Witherington, Ben III, 2004, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan.