

Lesson 8 at StudyRomans.org

Romans 1:1, Continued

Romans 1:1 — Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God,

Last week we looked at the first half of verse 1: “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus.” And we looked at what that first description of Paul as a slave of Christ tells us about Paul and about his mission.

Paul was a slave of Christ. But why should the Romans listen to what a slave has to say to them? Paul answers that question with the next description of himself — Paul was a slave of Christ who was also an Apostle of Christ. This letter was not just from Paul the slave. This letter was from Paul the Apostle, and Paul the Apostle had apostolic authority over the church in Rome.

The Greek word translated “Apostle” means a delegate or a messenger sent on a mission. And sometimes that is all the word means.

- For example, in Philippians 2:25, Paul refers to Epaphroditus as “your **messenger** and minister to my needs.” The Greek word translated “messenger” in that verse is the same word translated “apostle” here in verse 1.
- Likewise, Jesus is called “the **apostle** and high priest of our confession” in Hebrews 3:1, referring to the role of God the Son as a **messenger** from God the Father.

There are some other uses of the word “apostle” where we can’t say for sure whether the term is being used narrowly or broadly. For example:

- Barnabas and Paul are together called apostles in Acts 14:14. Was Barnabas an Apostle?
- James, the brother of Christ, is called an apostle in Galatians 1:19 and in 1 Corinthians 15:7. And, two verses earlier in 1 Corinthians 15:5, Paul refers to “the twelve,” seemingly different from “all the apostles” in verse 7. Was James the brother of Christ an Apostle?

The short answer to both of those questions is that we don’t know for sure, but I think we can say that James, at least, was most likely another Apostle (in addition to Matthias and Paul) who was not part of the original twelve.

But, with those questions aside, here in verse 1, the word “apostle” certainly has its narrow meaning, which is also the most common meaning in the Bible: an Apostle was someone who held a special office in the church that was occupied only by a chosen few who had been eye witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection (Acts 1:22).

Jesus, of course, chose the first twelve apostles, and Peter and the others in Acts 1 later chose Matthias as a replacement for Judas.

Likewise, Paul tells us that he was also chosen to be an Apostle. Specifically, in verse 1 Paul says that he was **called** to be an apostle, or literally “a called Apostle,” but called by whom?

Paul does not answer that question in verse 1 of Romans, but Paul does answer that question in verse 1 of another letter.

Galatians 1:1 (ESV) — Paul, an apostle — **not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father**, who raised him from the dead.

Paul was called **by God** to be an apostle. Paul was not called from men or through men, but instead Paul was called through God the Son and God the Father.

But was Paul qualified to be an Apostle? Unlike the other Apostles, Paul had not been a follower of Jesus during his earthly ministry, and, unlike the other Apostles, Jesus did not appear to Paul between his resurrection and his ascension.

But Jesus did appear to Paul after his resurrection and after his ascension as we read in Acts 9. That difference between Paul and the other Apostles is why Paul described himself as “untimely born.”

1 Corinthians 15:8-10 — Last of all, as to one **untimely born**, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

And, of course, that passage provides another important difference between Paul and the other Apostles — Paul had earlier persecuted the church of God. In fact, Acts 9:1 tells us that Paul had been “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” just prior to seeing the Lord.

But, even so, Paul was now an Apostle just as surely as Peter, James, and John were Apostles. But what did it mean to be an Apostle?

- It meant that God spoke through you (Matthew 10:20).
- It meant that God performed miracles through you (Matthew 10:8).
- It meant that God performed miracles through others upon whom you laid your hands (Acts 8:18).
- It meant that God gave you authority over every congregation of the Lord's church (1 Corinthians 16:1).
- It meant that you were a part of the foundation upon which the church was built (Ephesians 2:20).

And for those today who suggest that Peter held a position that was higher than the other Apostles, that would certainly have come as news to Paul! Remember that Paul rebuked Peter to his face in Galatians 2:11 because Peter stood condemned.

Are there any Apostles around today? No, there are not. As far as the written record tells us, there were at most only four Apostles after the original twelve (Matthias, Paul, James, and Barnabas), and there is some question about whether James and Barnabas should be on that list. And no one today could qualify as an Apostle because no one today was an eye witness to the resurrection of Christ. Also, I think Paul told us in 1 Corinthians 15:8 that he was the last person to become an Apostle. ("**Last of all**, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.")

The Apostle John was most likely the last Apostle to die, and with that event there were no longer any Apostles remaining on earth. The Apostleship was a select group of men needed for a select period of time during the infancy of the church. And we do not need Apostles today because (unlike the early church) we have the complete written word of God.

Yes, we have restored the New Testament church, but we have not restored the Apostleship because that is not something that can be restored today. What that means is that, unlike in the first century, there is not anyone today who has any authority beyond the authority an elder has in the local congregation where he serves. The next person up from an elder on that ladder of authority is Christ himself, who is the head of the church (Ephesians 5:23).

What that means is that all of that complicated Catholic and denominational human hierarchy that we see around us today comes from the mind of man and not from the mind of God.

Let's focus now on the word **"called"** in verse 1. Paul was "called" to be an Apostle. What does it mean to be "called"?

The word "call" is one of our key words in Romans. That word, in its various forms, is used 15 times, sometimes with God doing the calling (as we see here in verse 1) and other times with us doing the calling (as for example, in Romans 10:13 — "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved"). Each time we see the word, we need to ask both who is doing the call and who is being called.

And the meaning of the call can be different in different contexts. I think we see that here in the opening verses of Chapter 1.

Here in verse 1, Paul is called to be an apostle, but later, in verses 6 and 7 we will see people who are called to belong to Christ and called to be saints. I think we see two different types of calls in those verses — a call to service in verse 1, and the gospel call in verses 6 and 7.

Could Paul have refused to answer this call in verse 1? Could Paul have disbelieved what he saw with his own two eyes on that road to Damascus? I think the answer is certainly yes. After all, if God was planning to force Paul to believe, then why would God provide all of that evidence? God provides evidence to persuade us to make a certain choice, but no evidence is needed if we have no choice to make.

Paul was given a choice on that road to Damascus, and Paul made the correct choice when he obeyed the gospel shortly thereafter. And Paul accepted the mission that God gave him, including the mission to be an Apostle.

In short, Paul was called, and Paul accepted the call. And that is not surprising given the preceding description in verse 1 — Paul was a slave of Christ! Slaves always accepted the call of their master. That is what it meant to be a slave. To do otherwise was rebellion against their master.

Now, here is a crucial point about the call of God in the Bible — sometimes that call is described **broadly** and sometimes that call is described **narrowly**.

When the call of God is described broadly, it applies whether the call is accepted or not. But when the call of God is described narrowly, it is limited to calls that were accepted. In both cases, God called, but

only in the narrow case do we know that the answer to the call was an acceptance of the call of God.

We see similar distinctions today. For example, a university sends acceptance letters to those students who have been admitted. But not all of those students accept those offers, and so when the first day of class arrives, we find a smaller group of admitted students. If I got an offer of admission but turned it down, then I am an admitted student in a broad sense. But only those who accepted the offer are admitted students in the narrower sense.

The word “called” in the Bible is similar. Sometimes it is used broadly and sometimes it is used narrowly.

What is an example of the **broad** use of the word “call”?

Luke 5:32 — I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.

Jesus came to call sinners to repentance. Did all sinners repent? No, they did not. Some repented, but many did not. Were they all called to repent? Yes, all were called — but only some accepted that call.

And what is an example of the **narrow** use of the word “call”?

We are looking at an example right here in verse 1. Paul is not just saying here that he was called to be an Apostle — that he had once been considered for the role of Apostle. Instead, what Paul is saying here is that **he is an Apostle**. Paul is saying both that God called him and that he accepted that call.

And I think we will again see a narrow use in verse 7 with those in Rome who are loved by God and **called** to be saints. There is a broad

sense in which everyone on earth is loved by God (John 3:16) and called to be saints (Mark 16:15). But verse 7 is describing the church in Rome, and so we know the people who were loved in verse 7 are the people who were called to be Saints, who accepted that call by obeying the gospel, and who were then added to the church by God.

In verse 1, Paul says that he has been “set apart for the gospel of God.” When did that happen? When was Paul set apart?

Again, Paul does not answer that question here, but Paul does answer that question elsewhere.

Galatians 1:15-16 — But when he who had set me apart **before I was born**, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone.

And, once again, I think we are seeing a word that is sometimes used broadly and sometimes used narrowly.

In a broad sense, every Christian is set apart for the gospel of God. The same Greek word found here in verse 1 is used elsewhere to describe all who would follow Christ.

2 Corinthians 6:17 (ESV) — Therefore go out from their midst, and **be separate from them**, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you.

But I think Paul has a much narrower view in mind here given what he told the Galatians. Paul was set apart **before he was born!**

What does that mean? I think it means what we said in our introduction when we studied Paul's unique background — it means that God had been planning for Paul before Paul was born.

God had moved all the pieces in place so that Paul would be a Hebrew of the Hebrews as well as a Roman citizen steeped in Greek culture. I think Paul, in hindsight, recognized the hand of God at work in his own life before he obeyed the gospel and even before he was born.

And Paul knew what it means to be **set apart**. Remember that Paul was a Pharisee, which came from the Hebrew word meaning to separate. Every Pharisee saw himself as having been separated for God, but Paul now understood that he had been separated for the gospel of God — not as a Pharisee, but as a slave for Christ and as an Apostle!

Finally, verse 1 tells us that Paul was set apart for the **gospel** of God. **What is the gospel?**

Perhaps the first thing we should note about the gospel is that it did not take long for Paul to mention it! We find the gospel right here in the very first verse of Romans, so it should come as no surprise if the gospel turns out to be a major focus of this letter.

But what is the gospel? We all know that the Greek word translated “gospel” means good message or good news. But what is that good news? What is that good message?

Let's start by looking at 25 facts (shown on the Handout for Lesson 8) that the Bible tells us about the gospel:

1. The gospel is good news about the kingdom (Matthew 4:23).

2. The gospel is good news for the whole world (Matthew 26:13).
3. The gospel is good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Mark 1:1).
4. The gospel is good news proclaimed by Christ (Mark 1:14).
5. The gospel is good news that can be believed in (Mark 1:15).
6. The gospel is good news that can cost us our lives (Mark 8:35).
7. The gospel is good news that can cost us our family (Mark 10:29).
8. The gospel is good news proclaimed by Christians (Mark 16:15).
9. The gospel is good news that is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Romans 1:16).
10. The gospel is good news about God's judgment of men by Christ Jesus (Romans 2:16).
11. The gospel is good news that can be obeyed (Romans 10:16).
12. The gospel is good news about the cross of Christ rather than the wisdom of man (1 Corinthians 1:17).
13. The gospel is good news that we receive, in which we stand, and by which we are saved (1 Corinthians 15:1-2).
14. The gospel is good news that Satan can blind us from seeing (2 Corinthians 4:4).
15. The gospel is good news that can be confessed (2 Corinthians 9:13).

16. The gospel is good news that some want to distort (Galatians 1:7).
17. The gospel is good news that did not come from man (Galatians 1:11).
18. The gospel is good news that is true (Galatians 2:5).
19. The gospel is good news that was preached by Scripture to Abraham (Galatians 3:8).
20. The gospel is good news of our salvation (Ephesians 1:13).
21. The gospel is good news of peace (Ephesians 6:15).
22. The gospel is good news that can be defended and confirmed (Philippians 1:7).
23. The gospel is good news of hope (Colossians 1:23).
24. The gospel is good news through which we are called (2 Thessalonians 2:14).
25. The gospel is good news of life and immortality (2 Timothy 1:10).

So what then is the gospel? It is everything that we just read! If we try to define it, we need to come up with a definition that, at the very least, encompasses each of these 25 descriptions.

And if we ever try to define a word in the Bible without looking at all the Bible has to say about that word, then we will very likely end up in a ditch! Whatever the word “gospel” means, we know that its definition will, at least, include these 25 facts.

Does the gospel include the promise of Christ? Does the gospel include the coming of Christ? Does the gospel include the teaching of Christ? Does the gospel include the cross of Christ? Does the gospel include our salvation, our hope, and our peace? Does the gospel include our life and immortality? Does the gospel include judgment? Does the gospel include commands that we must obey? Does the gospel include some Old Testament verses? Yes to all of those questions. The gospel includes all of that!

If I had to come up with a definition of the gospel that includes all of these descriptions from the Bible, I would propose this definition: **the gospel is everything the Bible tells us about Jesus**. Under that definition, the gospel includes **all** of the New Testament and **much** of the Old Testament — the good news is everything the Bible tells us about Jesus!

But if all of that is true, then wouldn't that mean that the good news includes some bad news? Yes, in a sense.

For example, the gospel includes a message of judgment. Paul will tell us that fact about the gospel later in this same letter.

Romans 2:16 — On that day when, **according to my gospel**, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

So, yes, the good news of the gospel does include some bad news in a sense — **but that bad news is bad news only for those who reject and disobey the gospel**. The good news is that no one needs to suffer that bad news. God wants everyone to obey the gospel of Christ and be saved. With the gospel, Jesus turns the bad news into good news!

2 Corinthians 1:20 — For **all** the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.

And, yes, my proposed definition of “gospel” is pretty broad, but I think that is a good thing.

First, are there some descriptions of Jesus in the Bible that we are going to suggest should not be considered “good news”? I can’t think of anything. Jesus did not come to bring us bad news; Jesus came to save us from the bad news.

But, second, we need to be very careful if we ever try to put the gospel in a box by saying that this part of the New Testament is the gospel but that part of the New Testament is not the gospel.

That path has led some to elevate a part of God’s word over some other part of God’s word — such as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John over the epistles of Paul, or such as the red letters over the black letters, or such as a single verse (maybe John 3:16) over every other verse in the Bible. I have seen definitions of the “gospel” that do each of those things — and I think that is the wrong approach.

In short, some people have divided the New Testament into what they call “the gospel” (which, by a remarkable coincidence, also turns out to be the part they want to obey) and the non-gospel (which again, by a strange coincidence, turns out to be the part of the Bible they do not want to obey!). And then we hear them say, “Let’s just all focus on the gospel, and not worry about those other commands.”

That is not the way we should ever approach the word of God. As we can see from the Handout for Lesson 8, the Bible casts a very broad

net in its descriptions of the gospel of Christ, and so must we. And if we ever start trying to divide up the New Testament into the part we want to obey and the part we don't want to obey, then we can be certain we have taken a wrong turn!

Jesus is God's good news! Jesus is the great blessing for the whole world that was promised to Abraham. The gospel is everything the Bible tells us about Jesus.

And Paul, the slave and Apostle, was set apart for the gospel of God, and isn't that exactly what we see when we look at Paul? Someone set apart for the gospel?

1 Corinthians 2:2 — For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Paul was focused entirely on the gospel! Paul proclaimed the gospel everywhere he went, and he suffered for the gospel everywhere he went. And Paul understood the power of the gospel, which is something he will tell us about later in this first chapter.

Romans 1:2

Romans 1:2 — which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures,

“Which he promised” — what is the “which” in verse 2? The “which” in verse 2 is what we see at the end of verse 1 — the gospel of God. In verse 2, Paul is telling us that the gospel of God had been promised earlier by the Old Testament prophets.

Well, if the gospel is in the Old Testament, and if Paul was such a great student of the Old Testament, then why hadn't Paul already seen the gospel and recognized Christ long before the events in Acts 9?

Once again, Paul does not answer that question here, but he does answer that question elsewhere.

2 Corinthians 3:14-16 (ESV) — But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.

Paul will have much more to say on this subject later in Romans, but I think we see an early hint of it here in verse 2.

The gospel arrived as a great surprise to Paul, but it should not have been a great surprise. Why not? Because the gospel had been promised by the prophets in the Old Testament. But Paul did not see it. Why not? Because his mind was hardened and because there was a veil over his heart.

Yes, the gospel arrived as a surprise to Paul and to many of his fellow Jews, but they were hardly the only people who were ever surprised to find the gospel in the Old Testament. Many people today are equally surprised when they learn that fact.

And it is a fact. The gospel of Christ is on display all throughout the Old Testament. We know that from what Paul just told us here in verse 2, but we also know that because we have studied the Old Testament without any veil over our hearts. We have studied the Old

Testament in light of the New Testament, and so we know how often the gospel of Christ is described in the Old Testament.

And we know that the gospel of Jesus Christ was preached to Abraham two millennia before Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

Galatians 3:8 — And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, **preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham**, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.”

And if we have any doubts here in chapter 1 of Romans, we will have no doubts by the time we get to chapter 16. Why not? Because Paul is going to show us over and over throughout this entire letter how the Old Testament describes what is happening in the New Testament.

So who were the Old Testament prophets who told us about the gospel?

- Moses was a prophet (Deuteronomy 18:18), and Moses prophesied about the gospel (Luke 24:44).
- King David was a prophet (Acts 2:30), and King David prophesied about the gospel (Psalm 16:10).
- And, of course, **all** of the prophets from Isaiah to Malachi prophesied about the gospel. That is what Peter told us:

Acts 10:43 — To him **all the prophets** bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

And does that surprise anyone? God did not send the prophets in the Old Testament to predict the weather (although that did happen).

God sent the prophets to proclaim the coming of the Messiah and his eternal kingdom. The prophets were sent to encourage the people to be faithful to God so that God could use his faithful people to bless the entire world through Christ.

Paul tells us that here, and Paul will tell us that again later in this same letter.

Romans 3:21-22 — But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law **and the Prophets** bear witness to it — the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

Verse 2 confirms something we said about verse 1 — the gospel is everything the Bible tells us about Jesus! These Old Testament prophets were telling people about Jesus! They were telling people about the gospel of Christ!

These prophets were pointing people to the great blessing that had been promised to Abraham but that had not yet come. That great blessing is Christ, the promised Messiah, and the gospel is everything the Bible tells us about Christ. Everything about Jesus is good news!

Romans 1:3

Romans 1:3 — concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh

Verse 3 confirms what we just said about verse 2 — that which God promised through his prophets was the Messiah. What was promised was concerning the Son of God. That is what verse 3 tells us.

So far in three verses, Paul has mentioned Jesus directly in two of those verses and indirectly in verse 2. If we look down the page a bit, we will see that Paul keeps that up. In the first 9 verses, Paul refers to Jesus directly in 8 verses.

Can there be any doubt about **Paul's** focus on Christ? That question is easy to answer. Let me ask a harder question: can there be any doubt about **our** focus on Christ?

If we are not asking ourselves questions like that after every verse in Romans, then we aren't going to grow very much as a result of our study. Paul was completely focused on Jesus. Are we completely focused on Jesus?