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Mooroolbark Christian Fellowship

Study Supplement No. 9

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by Joseph Tkach

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Working together for the gospel

The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) is a well-known statement of the purpose of the church. It involves *going* in order to make disciples, whom we are to baptise and teach.

The Great Commission isn't a stay-at-home project. We won't catch fish unless we go to the water, and it doesn't do any good to catch them if we just throw them back in. We need to go, and we need to make disciples.

Eager to share

I have written about our need to share the gospel, and I mentioned that every Christian should be "ready to give an answer." Being ready implies not just having an answer, but being on alert to actually give it. When we really believe the gospel, we become eager to do what Jesus Christ wants us to do. Faith makes us eager to look for opportunities, even create opportunities, because we want to give this answer that God has given us.

We do not share the gospel to chalk up points or get an obligation out of the way so we can say, "Been there, done that." We share the gospel because Christ, who died and rose again, lives in us. Just as Christ did not come to be ministered to, but to minister, so the church cannot rightly be his body in the world by keeping its faith to itself.

The church exists not for its own sake, but for the sake of the world, just as Jesus came not to do his own will, but the will of the Father who sent him. Christian faith changes us in the way in which we interact with the world. As Christians, we are still part of the world around us, but we are now, since Christ lives in us, part of the world in an entirely new way—a way that makes a positive impact in the name of our God who loves the world so much that he sent his Son for its salvation.

People need to know that God loves them, that their lives have meaning and purpose, that there really is hope even when physical life seems pointless. God has given us good news for them, and the Holy Spirit in us makes us eager to give it to them.

They may not be eager to hear it, to be sure. Many people think they are doing just fine without God. But eventually the things they trust in — money, health, friends, intelligence, etc. — will disappoint them, and they will be ready to hear about a hope that truly is secure. That's when we need to be ready, and in order to be ready, we need to be alert, and in order to be alert we need to be eager and looking for opportunities.

One more thing: It is deeply satisfying to be used by God to help someone else. Evangelism gives us a tremendous sense of significance, because we are taking part in eternal work, sharing by grace in the very work of God himself, his work of redeeming from sin and saving from death our fellow human beings.

Working together

Each of us needs other people. None of us are self-sufficient, though we may think we are. God spreads his gifts around so we have to work together for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:7, 11). God wants his people to gather for regular fellowship, worship, discipleship and ministry. That's why evangelism is only the first step in the Great Commission.

Infant believers need a family to teach, encourage, protect and help them.

"Independent Christians" who avoid worship meetings rarely share the gospel and rarely live out the biblical commands to love, encourage and help one another. They live as though they are self-sufficient, and they tend to avoid any sort of public acknowledgement that they trust in Jesus Christ.

We cannot be ready to express the hope that lies within us when we routinely avoid opportunities to do so. And we can hardly "bear one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2) by avoiding fellowship. Paul wrote that no Christian can say to other Christians, "I have no need of you" (1 Corinthians 12:21).

Different people are differently gifted. Some think that evangelism is the main thing; others think that discipleship is the priority; and still others think that fellowship is all that's needed for a healthy church. Some focus on music, some on youths, some on grace, and some on guidance. Some are physically unable to leave their homes, and prayer is their labour of love.

Paul's point is that all such people need to learn to work together. Indeed, being together is a learning experience in itself—we learn to love not by being surrounded by people easy to love, but by sometimes being with people who are hard to love—people who are different from us. God puts us together for our own good, and we do his work better when we work together. Ephesians 4:16 tells us that the church grows "as each part does its work." Have you found a meaningful way to support the Great Commission? If not, ask God to help you. It's something worth thinking about.

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Psalms: When you talk to God

By **Jim Herst**
and **Tim Finlay**

Hebrew Scribe

A Hebrew scribe writes on papyrus. Scrolls of papyrus were often stored in clay jars for protection (Jeremiah 32:14) and were frequently sealed (Revelation 5:1). Papyrus is translated as "paper" in 2 John 12. (Illustrations by Ken Tunell)

In 2 Chronicles 7:6, David is given recognition for making the musical instruments used in the temple. In the postexilic era, Levitical singers are mentioned as the descendants of Asaph, the "singing-master" appointed by David (Ezra 2:41; Nehemiah 7:44; 11:22, 23). From passages such as these we have a definite indication that liturgical music and organization stemmed from David's time" (*Baker Encyclopaedia of the Bible*, vol. 2, p. 1504).



The book of Psalms can be one of the most effective tools in building your relationship with God. If you feel your prayer life is in decline, read the Psalms. They are the emotional outpourings of people in a host of different situations.

They are "a treasury of experiences accumulated by generations of people who lived in the region where the cradle of our own civilization stood" (Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms: Part 1, The*

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Forms of the Old Testament Literature, vol. 14, p. 36). Reading their prayers to God can help rejuvenate your own prayer life.

A psalm for every occasion

Some psalms are for periods of elation, when you want to praise your Creator or give thanks to him. Others help in those times of depression when you are going through a severe trial. Still other psalms are confessions of sin and pleas for forgiveness. Certainly, this is one type of prayer that we all need! As the apostle John said, "If we confess our sins [Jesus Christ] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Many people are surprised by the uncompromising frankness with which the psalmists speak to God. The psalmists do not hesitate to confront him with their everyday problems, to verbalize their frustration, their anger, their resentment or their despair. But that is how God wants us to be when we talk with him—open, honest, not pulling any punches. The Life Application Bible says: "Because of the honesty expressed by the psalmists, men and women throughout history have come, again and again, to the book of Psalms for comfort during times of struggle and distress. And with the psalmists, they have risen from the depths of despair to new heights of joy and praise as they also discovered the power of God's everlasting love and forgiveness" (NIV, Introduction to Psalms).

Many of the psalms were written to express the thoughts and feelings of the community, the congregation of believers.

As we examine in further detail the different types of psalms—the individual and the congregational, the instructive and the emotional—we shall see that there is indeed a psalm for every occasion.

Hymns of praise

The main element in many psalms is simply praising God. Psalm 145 is a prime example. David begins: "I will exalt you, my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever. Every day I will praise you and extol your name for ever and ever" (verses 1-2). David then shows how others will exalt God: "One generation will commend your works to another; they will tell of your mighty acts. They will speak of the glorious splendour of your majesty, and I will meditate on your wonderful works. They will tell of the power of your awesome works, and I will proclaim your great deeds" (verses 4-6). David concludes by calling upon everyone to praise God's name (verse 21).

Several hymns of praise emphasize admiration and wonder at God's creation. In Psalm 8, David begins and ends with the same words of praise: "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (verses 1, 9).

Beginning and ending a thought with the same words is known as the envelope structure, which is common in the book of Psalms. This structure emphasizes the main point—God's name is to be praised in all the earth.

While David praises God for the creation, he also marvels that God is so concerned with humans: "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" (verses 3-4).

Humans, alone of God's creation, were made in the image of God. God, the transcendent Creator of the universe, wants us to

have an eternal relationship with him. He begins by giving us an important responsibility on his earth: "You made [man] a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honour. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas" (verses 5-8).

In Genesis, God placed the first man and woman in the garden and told them to work it and take care of it (Genesis 2:15). David here reiterates that God has ordained human beings to be the head of the creation. As such, it is our duty to care for our environment.

In another hymn of praise, David proclaims: "Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the splendour of his holiness" (Psalm 29:2). Throughout this psalm, David praises God's power in a series of striking metaphors: "The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon. He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, Sirion like a young wild ox. The voice of the Lord strikes with flashes of lightning. The voice of the Lord shakes the desert" (verses 5-8).

Some hymns of praise were sung together by the community. Psalm 33, which calls for all to praise God and describes his mighty deeds, ends with the community proclaiming: "We wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. May your unfailing love rest upon us, O Lord, even as we put our hope in you" (verses 20-22).

Psalms 104 and 105 are complementary hymns of praise, both ending with "Praise the Lord" (Psalm 104:35; 105:45). Psalm 104 praises God as the Sustainer of his creation: "He makes springs pour water into the ravines; it flows between the mountains. They give water to all the beasts of the field.... He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate—bringing forth food from the earth: wine that gladdens the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread that sustains his heart" (verses 10-11, 14-15).

God is the Creator and the Sustainer of his creation. He is the Life-giver and the Provider of sustenance. All God's creatures "look to you to give them their food at the proper time. When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things. When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth" (verses 27-30). Here we also see the activity of the Spirit of God in creating and in renewing the creation.

Psalm 105 praises God for his loyalty: "He remembers his covenant forever, the word he commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant he made with Abraham, the oath he swore to Isaac. He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree, to Israel as an everlasting covenant" (verses 8-10).

The psalm recalls how God demonstrated his faithfulness to his people centuries earlier by sending Joseph before them into Egypt to save them from the famine (verses 16-22). It recalls how God directed his chosen servants Moses and Aaron to perform his signs and wonders to the Egyptians, and how God delivered his people from slavery (verses 26-41).

All these hymns of praise are examples for us: A good portion of our prayer time should be spent in praising God. Jesus began his model prayer, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name" (Matthew 6:9). We, too, would do well to begin our prayers by

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praising God. We should praise God as the Creator, Sustainer and Life-giver, and as the Ever-faithful One to his people.

Songs of thanksgiving

Whereas the hymn of praise glorifies God for being who he is, the song of thanksgiving emphasizes gratitude for what he has done for us. In Psalm 30, David says: "I will exalt you, O Lord, for you lifted me out of the depths and did not let my enemies gloat over me. O Lord my God, I called to you for help and you healed me" (verses 1-2).

David calls others to join him in praising God: "Sing to the Lord, you saints of his; praise his holy name" (verse 4). He thanks God for having turned his life around: "You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing to you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever" (verses 11-12).

Psalm 66 is another typical song of thanksgiving. It begins with an exultation of joy: "Shout with joy to God, all the earth! Sing the glory of his name; make his praise glorious! Say to God, 'How awesome are your deeds! So great is your power that your enemies cringe before you. All the earth bows down to you; they sing praise to you, they sing praise to your name.' Selah" (verses 1-4).

The term "Selah" marks the end of a strophe—a musical term for a section of verses. This particular psalm is divided into four strophes: verses 1-4, 5-7, 8-15 and 16-20. In the second strophe, the psalmist recalls God's mercy to Israel when he parted the waters of the Red Sea, enabling Israel to escape from the Egyptians (verses 5-7). In the third strophe, the composer thanks the God who "has preserved our lives and kept our feet from slipping" (verse 9), and describes how God has tested and refined them through trials (verses 10-12).

This last point is especially important. In the midst of our trials, we often cry out to God for deliverance. And so we should. But we also need to remember that through our trials we develop godly patience.

The apostle James wrote: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance" (James 1:2-3).

In the final strophe of Psalm 66, the author thanks God for what he has done for him personally, and acknowledges that God has answered his prayers (verses 16-20). When trouble strikes, how easy it is to forget the blessings God has given us. So when we pray, let us remember what God has done on our behalf, and thank him for it.

Praise and thanksgiving go hand in hand. Psalm 103 begins and ends with the inclusion: "Praise the Lord, O my soul" (verses 1, 22). But much of the psalm is devoted to being thankful for God's blessings: "And forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's" (verses 2-5).

This list of blessings includes two of vital importance: God forgives sins and he heals diseases. Jesus exercised his authority as God to forgive sin and to heal (Matthew 9:2-8).

God's forgiving nature is one of the attributes we should be most grateful for: "He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens

are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:10-12).

David ends the psalm with a triple invocation to bless God: "Praise the Lord, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word. Praise the Lord, all his heavenly hosts, you his servants who do his will. Praise the Lord, all his works everywhere in his dominion" (verses 20-22), followed by the inclusion: "Praise the Lord, O my soul."

One psalm particularly emphasizes thanking God for his mercy—Psalm 136. It begins: "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever. Give thanks to the God of gods. His love endures forever. Give thanks to the Lord of lords: His love endures forever" (verses 1-3). All 26 verses of this psalm end with the same refrain: "His love endures forever." The Hebrew word translated "love" here is not 'ahabhah, the standard word for "love," but chesed, which means "steadfast love" or "faithfulness born out of a sense of caring and commitment."

Psalm 136 marvels at God's wonders (verses 4-9) and shows how God demonstrated his chesed by his blessings upon Israel (verses 10-22). This psalm was a communal song. Those who sang it thanked God, "who remembered us in our low estate ... and freed us from our enemies" (verses 23-24).

The psalm concludes with another point we should bear in mind when we pray: "Give thanks to the God of heaven. His love endures forever" (verse 26). Again, this ties in with the hymns of praise—we can thank God that he is the loving Ever-faithful One.

Psalm superscriptions

Many psalms contain a superscription giving information about the psalm. In the Hebrew Bible, the superscription often counts as the first verse of the psalm itself. (The Hebrew Bible and English translations will, therefore, often differ by one verse in citations.)

Many psalms are assigned in the superscriptions to certain individuals, such as David, or certain groups of individuals, such as the Sons of Korah. Thirteen psalms relate the historical background to David's life at the time of the psalm: Psalms 3, 7, 18, 34, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63, 142. This information enhances our appreciation of the psalm.

Superscriptions often convey information concerning the musical performance of the psalm. Sometimes they name the accompanying tune: "The Death of the Son" (Psalm 9), "The Lily of the Covenant" (Psalm 60) and "Do Not Destroy" (Psalms 57, 58, 59, 75). Unfortunately, we do not know any of these melodies today.

Other superscriptions tell us which instruments accompanied the psalm: stringed instruments (Psalms 4, 61, 76), flutes (Psalm 5), an eight-stringed harp (Hebrew: sheminith) (Psalms 6, 12) and an instrument of Gath (Hebrew: gittith) (Psalms 8, 81, 84). We can only conjecture about how some of these instruments may have looked and sounded.

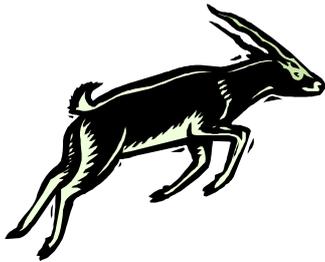
The category of the psalm is often included in the superscription. The two most common are "psalm" (Hebrew: mizmor) and "song" (Hebrew: shir). Other categories include: shiggaion (Psalm 7), miktam (Psalms 16, 56-60) and maskil (Psalms 32, 74, 142). The New International Version leaves these terms untranslated.

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Again, it is not known for sure what many of these terms mean. This lack of knowledge is another indication of the gap that exists between our culture and that of the ancient Hebrews. Even if what all the superscriptions achieve is only to make us realize that there is always more to understand about the Bible, they will have done us a great service.

*By Jim Herst and Tim Finlay
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Until We Leap Like Deer



by Judith Hayes

After breaking her neck in 1967 in a diving accident on Chesapeake Bay at the age of 17, Joni Eareckson not only had to face life as a quadriplegic, but also lose many of her hopes and dreams. Joni was an active, athletic teenager with a cute face filled with freckles and a ski-slope nose to match. She had a bright smile, and a head filled with questions about her accident.

In the summer of 1969 Joni met Steve Estes. Steve would become not only a close personal friend, but the co-author of many of the books Joni has written in the years that followed. Steve was also her companion as they both ventured into a deep study of the Bible to discover what God teaches about pain, suffering and healing.

Joni knows suffering. The wisdom and courage she has gained during her years of recovery and acceptance, have given birth to a woman of God who knows what she's talking about when it comes to facing the daily reality of living with pain.

There is a unique quality about Joni — a sense that she is living out her life with one foot penetrating the kingdom of heaven, while her other foot is firmly planted on earth, and both feet are being supported by her wheelchair.

Joni hasn't always "walked" in such peace and acceptance. "Years ago when I first had my accident, there were many months that I complained, felt resentment, deep depression and I became self-centred. As the months passed, I could feel that

God was healing my soul. My confusion was... *why* wasn't he healing my body?"

I was learning to accept my paralysis as a chronic condition and broaching my new life in God. My diving accident was the beginning of a long, arduous process in becoming like Christ."

Joni's family and friends became her mainstay and encouragement. Scores of believers laid hands on Joni and anointed her with oil. Friends often took her to Kathryn Kuhlman meetings to receive a healing. She wasn't healed. It became a vicious cycle.

Joni was not healed in the way she perceived God to heal. "I went to those services in desperation, claiming Bible verses and hoping God would give me what I asked for. I read my Bible. I prayed. Of course, God would heal me. There was something wrong with this picture. Why are my pleas not working? No one in the healing line in a wheelchair was healed."

It pushed Joni into a deeper study of God's Word. "My study of the Bible has not answered all of my questions, but it has taught me about the One who can make sense out of suffering. I began to grasp understanding of God's promises to me. I didn't learn to walk, but I learned to wait. I was never able to run again, but God gave me rest."

God's will for Joni was becoming clear. She could glorify God through her suffering. It would take humility and self-denial to leave her pleas for healing before God, to learn to take the focus off of herself and invest in others who were hurting, ill and injured. "I learned that trials can knock us off our pedestals of pride and force us to depend on God alone. They can also give us an incredible capacity to empathize and relate to others who hurt."

Joni believes as we suffer, we die to resentment, worry, and fear of the future, bitterness and the constant itching to have things our way. "I have discovered that God can heal. He does heal. But he is not obligated to heal. I believe we see healings as 'sneak previews' of things that are to come. Until then, I feel the Father wants to advance the kingdom of his Son and reclaim the earth as his. Part of that plan is advancing the gospel."

Joni has deep compassion for others like herself who live with daily pain, illness and disabilities. She is not hyper-spiritual, nor does she advocate that to those who suffer. "Too often we repress deep emotions about suffering. All we've done is shove the problem to the back burner where it simmers. We may also hide behind religious pretence rather than feel the real pain. Strong emotions can open up the door to asking the really hard questions, and ultimately getting closer to God."

Joni has experienced some cruelty during her 34 years as a quadriplegic. At a large Christian convention an unknown woman approached Joni and suggested that Joni could be healed of her paralysis if she repented. "I cannot allow those experiences to disillusion me from what God has impressed on my heart. He has given me the gift of 31 extra years to live, to love and to serve him. Most quadriplegics die by twenty years of age. I have a vision, and without that vision I would perish."

Many people have asked Joni for her advice about living with a disability or illness. She said she awakes most mornings and her first thoughts have been, God, I cannot do this. I'm tired of living this way. I have nothing to give. I need you! Thankfully, each day God hears her cries. She finds a smile to greet her caretaker,

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and peace and grace to meet the day. "I have asked God if it is his will that I suffer. He has shown me how my suffering fits into a much bigger picture. It is the salvation of many, and the sanctification of our souls. God resists the proud and showers grace upon the humble. God is looking for willing hearts, not just to make our lives free from troubles."

Joni Eareckson Tada is the founder and president of *Joni and Friends*, an organization accelerating Christian ministry in the disability community. She has been married to Ken Tada since 1982. Joni is a prolific author of 27 books, best known for her autobiography, *Joni*, published in 1976. She was also a general editor for the *Encouragement Bible* by Zondervan Publishing. In addition, Joni is a sought-after conference speaker around the world.

"I still do not have all of the answers to why God chooses to heal some and not others. One day the Lord will come back as reigning King. Healing — complete and total — will be ours. Until then, people like myself remain in wheelchairs. I have that promise in Isaiah 35:3-6: 'Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance, with divine retribution he will come to save you. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf be unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.'"

*Judith Hayes lives in Chatsworth, California.
Joni and Ken Tada live in Southern California where Ken teaches high school and Joni is busy with Joni and Friends.
While they do not have children of their own, they enjoy young people as well as their joint ministry to those with disabilities.*

by Judith Hayes

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Bible Study

Not ashamed of the gospel

A study of Romans 1:1-17

In the year A.D. 57, Paul was on his third missionary journey, getting ready to go back to Jerusalem with an offering from the churches in Greece. Although he knew he had enemies in Jerusalem, he was already thinking about his fourth missionary trip.

Paul wanted to go to Spain, and the best travel route would take him through Rome. This could work out well, Paul thought. There are already Christians in Rome, and they might be willing to support my trip to Spain, just as the Antioch church supported my earlier missionary journeys and the Macedonian churches supported me while I was in southern Greece.

So Paul decided to write to the Roman Christians to let them know that he planned to come to Rome and then go to Spain—and that he would appreciate some support. However, Paul had a problem: the Roman Christians might have heard some erroneous rumours about what Paul preached. To prevent misunderstanding, Paul explains what the gospel is, so they will know what they are being asked to support.

But that is only the first half of Romans. In the second half, Paul deals with some problems that existed in the Roman

churches—especially the tension between Jewish Christians and gentile Christians. Paul uses part of his letter to discuss Jew-Gentile relationships in God's plan, and Christian conduct and love for others. He tries to give these Christians some doctrinal foundation for unity.

We do not know whether Paul made it to Spain, but his letter was a tremendous success in other ways. It has been valued throughout church history as the most doctrinally complete letter that Paul wrote. It is the letter that sparked the Reformation. It is the letter that influenced Martin Luther and John Wesley and countless others. It provides the benchmark for all studies of Paul's theology, and because of that, it is a cornerstone for understanding the doctrines of the early church.

Introduction to the gospel

Paul begins, as Greek letters normally did, by identifying himself: "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God..." (Rom. 1:1). Paul identifies himself as a slave who has been commanded to spend all his time on the gospel. He is sent by the master with the message of God.

Greek letters normally began by naming the sender, and then the recipients. But Paul is so focused on the gospel that, before he names the readers, he goes into a five-verse digression about the gospel. In effect, he puts his message at the top, before he even gets to the Dear so-and-so line. This makes it clear that his letter is about the gospel:

"The gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures..." (v. 2). Paul begins by linking the gospel to the Old Testament promises (as he also does in 1 Cor. 15:3-4). This provides a point of stability for gentile readers, and some reassurance for Jewish readers.

God's message is "regarding his Son." It is about the Son of God; the promises found in the Old Testament are fulfilled in Jesus Christ, "...who as to his human nature was a descendant of David" (Rom. 1:3). The gospel is again connected with the Old Testament past. The Son is a descendant of King David.

However, by saying "according to his human nature," Paul implies that something more than human nature is involved. This person at the centre of the gospel is not merely a human; he is also the Son of God in a way that other humans are not.

Verse 4: "who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord." Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus was powerfully demonstrated to be God's Son by his resurrection from the dead. Jesus, although a human descendant of David, was shown to be more than human by his resurrection into glory.

But the gospel does not stop with Jesus. It also includes us. "Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith" (v. 5). Paul will say a lot more about grace and obedience later in his letter. But he says here that "we" have not only received grace, but also apostleship. Paul is referring to his commission to take the gospel to the gentiles, and by "we" he means the small number of people who were working with him in this special mission, such as Timothy. They have received the grace of spreading the gospel.

He connects the gospel to the readers in verse 6: "And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ." The gospel says that believers belong to Christ.

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After this introductory description of the gospel, Paul gets back to the normal letter format by announcing who the letter is written to: "To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 7).

Paul does not greet "the church of God that is at Rome." He does not speak of it as a unity. (Chapter 16 suggests that there were several house churches.) Nor does he write to any particular church leaders. Instead, perhaps because he is not sure how this letter will be delivered, he addresses it to all the believers.

A prayer of thanks

Greek letters often included a prayer of thanksgiving to one of the gods, and Paul adapts this custom, thanking the true God: "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world" (v. 8). This tells us that Paul prayed through Christ, and it also tells us that "all the world" doesn't always mean the entire earth. In this case, it means the eastern Roman Empire. It was a figure of speech, not a geographical fact.

Paul gave God the credit for these people's faith. He didn't thank the people for believing—he thanked God, because God is the one who enables people to believe. Of our own, we would turn away. Whatever faith we have, we need to thank God as the one who gives us that faith.

In verse 9, Paul calls God as his witness, to stress that he is telling the truth: "God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times." People today might say, God knows that I pray for you every day.

Paul puts in a few extra words, adding that he serves God with his whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son. He is keeping the gospel in the discussion, keeping his role as a servant in the context. These are his credentials; this is what his life is about. Paul's authority does not rest on himself, but on his role as a servant of God. He is doing only what God wants, and if that's true, then the people need to listen to what he says.

Paul's plan to visit Rome

In verse 10 he adds something else: "and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you." Paul is telling them that he hopes to visit them. This helps create a relationship between the author and the recipients.

"I long to see you," he says in verse 11, "so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong." He wanted to strengthen them—but he quickly adds, "that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith" (v. 12). They would encourage Paul as well—at least, he hopes he would be!

If I were there in person, he seems to be saying, we would both benefit. But since this is only a letter, the communication can go only one way, and this letter is Paul's attempt to give them a spiritual gift to strengthen them.

Paul's plan is not a spur-of-the-moment idea. "I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles" (v. 13).

Paul has often thought of going to Rome. Even when Paul lived in Jerusalem, he would have met people from Rome and would have heard stories of its famous buildings. And Paul has already gone as far as Greece—why not go farther, to the capital of the Empire, where many Jews had already gone? But so far, circumstances prevented Paul from doing it.

Why did Paul want to come? He wanted a harvest—he wanted more people to accept the gospel of Christ. Although many Jews lived in Rome, Paul focused on the gentiles. (He implies here that most of the Roman Christians were gentile.) They were his primary mission field, even if he went to the synagogues first. In the synagogues, Paul could find gentiles who were prepared to receive the gospel.

An obligation to preach

"I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome" (vs. 14-15). Paul wanted to preach to everyone, and that's why he wanted to preach in Rome, as well.

"I am not ashamed of the gospel," he says in verse 16. He has already used the word *gospel* twice and given a couple of descriptions of it. He has stressed that this is his calling in life, his duty before God. He is not ashamed of the gospel—and he doesn't want the Romans to be ashamed of it, either.

He describes it again in verse 16: "It is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile." The gospel is the way that God saves people.

Technically, we are saved by grace, by what Christ has done for us. But the gospel is the means by which we learn of that salvation and the means by which we receive it. The gospel is the power of salvation because it tells us about salvation. God uses the gospel to bring salvation to everyone who accepts the message, to everyone who trusts in Christ (since Christ is the centre of the message, accepting the gospel means accepting Christ as well).

Paul is not ashamed of the gospel because it is the message of eternal life. It is nothing to be ashamed of—it is something to be shared with everyone, both Jews and gentiles.

Why is it a message of salvation? Because "in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith'" (v. 17).

The gospel reveals the righteousness of God. Righteousness means more than strict justice—it says that mercy is more important than justice. Justice says that sin must be punished, but God's righteousness gives us a way of escape. The gospel shows that God does right by being gracious.

What does Paul mean when he says that this righteousness is by faith? He is not talking about the way that God himself is righteous, as if it were by believing in himself. No, he is talking about righteousness that comes from God to people who have faith (see Phil. 3:9). It is his gift to them: they are then in a right relationship with him.

Paul quotes Habakkuk 2:4, which is about people who have faith. The gospel reveals a way that righteousness comes from God to people who have faith, and this righteousness is by faith from first to last, or literally, from faith to faith. In other words, it

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is the only way that righteousness comes. This is the way of salvation that the gospel reveals, and this is why Paul is not ashamed of it and why he wants to share it.

The good news is that when we accept the gospel, when we accept Christ and what he did for us, we are given, by God's grace, a righteousness from God. We need this righteousness, and the gospel reveals it: a righteousness we receive by faith, just as Habakkuk said: If we have faith, we will live.

This is far more than justice demands; it is even more than mercy demands. It is grace, a gift we did not deserve—and that is good news. The gospel reveals righteousness between God and us, and with that righteousness comes many benefits, from forgiveness to glory. Paul will have more to say about that in later chapters.

QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION

- What does it mean to "belong" to Jesus Christ? (v. 6) In this relationship, what are my obligations, and what are his?
- How often do I thank God for the faith that others have? (v. 8)
- Am I willing to call God as my witness that I am telling the truth? (v. 9)
- When I visit a church, do I look for mutual encouragement? (v. 12)
- Do I have an obligation to share the gospel with other people? (v. 14)
- On judgment day, will I be ashamed of what I did with the gospel?

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