

# GREAT GOOD NEWS

By Steve Zeisler

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January is always a time of change. The magnitude of change is greater this year than perhaps any other year of my life. Among the nations there are destructive forces and terrors and roilings on every side. Who knows what the map of Europe will look like next week, let alone next year. The upheaval in India, the continued problems of the Middle East, and starvation in Africa are all testimony to splintering change that is taking place around the world.

This country, too, is undergoing a significant change. The senior political leadership in Washington will now be in the hands of those of the Baby Boom generation who came of age during the '60s. There is a deep commitment to seeing things change in this nation, whether for better or for worse. Maybe you've noticed evidence of change in your work place in the rules about what is and what is not to take place on the job. Family life is undergoing change. The schools are attempting things they have never attempted before and casting aside aspects of education once considered important.

The result is that on every side, not just in the new calendar for 1993, the world in which we live is different. That has some very important ramifications for us as Christians, because any time significant and widespread change takes place it opens the door of opportunity for spiritual impact. Many people around us will find themselves more open to hear what God has said because they are trying to manage the turbulence in their life.

## A STABLE PLATFORM

This morning we're going to begin looking at the book of Romans. Our hope is to find a platform from which our own hearts will become secure and strong and capable so we have something to offer to other people.

I have been using crutches for the past four weeks, and I have found that the absolute key to using crutches is finding a secure place to put them down in order for them to bear the weight you're going to put on them. You can get around in dark, rainy weather. You can go up and down stairs (although last week I tried to do that with bifocals, which was a little disconcerting). You can manage uneven surfaces as long as you're very careful to put the crutches down on a secure place.

What we need spiritually is a secure place or platform, truth that does not change, from which we can draw sustenance for our own lives and which can serve us as we minister to a world that is desperately in need of truth. My guess is that most of us who have a degree of security that comes from faith in Christ, Christian community, families that are loving, and so on, have no idea how desperate, frightening, uncertain, and destabilized the world has become for many people. With a secure platform to plant our crutches on, we can move forward together, speak a word of truth, and offer hope.

With that in mind, let's turn to the first chapter of Romans. My purpose in the course of the next few weeks is not to try to study the book of Romans in detail, but rather to examine some of the key themes that inform the whole message that Paul wants to give us in this book. To change metaphors from crutches to navigation, if you were in a boat off shore in the dark of a storm, with crashing waves and rocks and passages that you needed to concern yourself with, what you would want to find first of all is a lighthouse to indicate where you were that you could then read the charts that were before you, find the channel, figure out where the rocks were, and be able to make your way to a safe haven.

The details of the book of Romans are a bit like charts that give you specific information that can make sense of

all of life. But it's critical to understand the themes, to know the great truths that stand on the promontories like lighthouses and cast light on everything, that help us to know where we are, so that we can make use of the details. Verses 16-17 are the theme of the entire book. The apostle Paul writes:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "But the righteous man shall live by faith."

There are four phrases here that we will concern ourselves with. The first phrase begins verse 16: "I am not ashamed of the gospel...." Why would Paul link the idea of refusal of shame with what is marvelous news? That's an important question for us. The second phrase follows: "...for [the gospel] is the power of God for salvation...." What does that mean and why is that important? And the third phrase follows: "...to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." Why is it important that this gospel is made available to everybody, and what are the implications that flow from that? The last phrase is at the end of verse 17: "The righteous [one] shall live by faith." What does that mean?

## **NOT ASHAMED OF THE GOSPEL**

The word gospel means not just good news, but a fabulous announcement. So it is startling that it should even occur to Paul to say that he is not ashamed of such glorious news. You might, of course, be ashamed of bad news; perhaps you would feel bad about it and be hesitant to share it. You might be ashamed of wickedness, failure, hypocrisy, and all kinds of bad things. But why would it ever even occur to you to announce your unashamedness about good news?

The idea of shame here is that of an embarrassing association. It is most often associated with something that is embarrassing or unsavory. For example, Paul wrote to Timothy at one point, "Do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, or of me His prisoner." If you say to someone, "My mentor in life, the one I've learned everything from and whom I'm patterning my life after, is in a Roman prison, you're sort of admitting that the person you're following in life hasn't made it. So there's an embarrassing association there. And Paul is saying here, "I don't view the gospel as an embarrassing association; my connection to it is not something that I'm hesitant about."

If we go back to verses 1-7 of chapter 1, we realize that there are some important credentials that Paul has highlighted. One of the reasons he is not ashamed of the good news is that it is both true and valuable and that it has an authoritative spokesman. Now, imagine that you knew some good news, but you weren't sure that it was true. Maybe somebody made it up, and it was a wonderful story kind of like Beauty and the Beast: the bad guys were overthrown, the good guys carried the day, and so on. It was a beautiful, positive story, but it was a fantasy. If there were any degree to which you weren't certain that what you were saying was absolutely true, or if the spokesman who brought the news was unreliable, you might expect people to respond, "Well, it sounds like good news, but the guy is a phony. Why would I believe anything he says?" And you might be uncertain about your relationship with this news.

## **A RELIABLE MESSAGE AND MESSENGER**

Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God....

Paul says in Romans 1:1 that he, the messenger who will speak this news, is a reliable messenger, anointed and given his calling by God himself. You can trust him. This is not a hypocrite or someone who is promoting himself for self-aggrandizement.

Secondly, he will go on to say in verse 2 about the message:

...which He promised beforehand through His prophets....

The message has ancient testimony to its validity. The great prophets of the Old Testament looked forward to the day when Messiah would come, the Son of God himself as Paul says in verse 3:

...concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David....

The Son of God became a Son of David, royal humanity and divinity wed together in this child who was born. Verse 4 continues:

...who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead according to the spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord....

There is a remarkable historical testimony to the power of the gospel centered in Jesus Christ: They found his tomb empty on the third day. The Spirit of holiness himself had given life again to Christ.

In verses 5-7 Paul is saying, "You can listen to me; I am worth hearing, because what I say comes from God, and I am uniquely appointed by him.

So two sturdy reasons for Paul's commitment to the gospel and his refusal to be embarrassed by it are its roots in Bible history and its validation by the resurrection. And Paul commends himself because he knows his calling is from God. Both the messenger and the message are reliable. So he says, "I am not ashamed."

Now why might you and I find ourselves embarrassed by association with the gospel? Are you ever hesitant to talk about your relationship with God? The opportunity to claim allegiance to Christ is there, but you're not quite sure what to say. Or do you ever find yourself the odd person out in a discussion because you have this intimacy with God that seems so peculiar to everyone else? You believe the Bible, and the others think it's an old dusty book of ancient myths. The most important reason Paul declares that he is not ashamed of the gospel is that he recognizes that we will always have a feeling of peculiarity in standing up for this truth. It will always isolate us a bit; it is counterculture in every culture. Maybe more than ever in the history of this nation Christians are going to be counterculture now; there are fewer and fewer echoes even remembering the biblical message in the wide culture that we live in, and we are more than ever peculiar to believe it. But it has always been true that radical, real commitment to the gospel makes you peculiar, and nobody likes to be different.

## **NO MORE DENIAL**

The reason, substantially, that it makes us peculiar or different is that the gospel message begins with a horrible denouncement of what it means to be human, to be a descendant of Adam and rebellious against God. This wonderful good news of the gospel message begins with the stark calling of people to look at who they are and to repent of it. To use the language that is familiar to us these days, the world is in denial, and everybody begins a relationship with God by being in denial.

The term denial is used in talking about counseling situations where people have to face something about themselves for the first time and are defensive. The husband or wife comes to their beloved and says, "Honey, we need counseling. Our marriage is in trouble; we're not doing well. We need the intervention of someone else." And immediately the defenses go up: "What do you mean? We don't need anybody else mucking up our marriage. We're doing just fine. There's nothing to be uncovered here." Yet there's pain everywhere, and it's being denied.

Or a teacher calls a parent on the phone and says, "Your son is having a hard time in school. I think there are some serious problems. Maybe he needs some extra testing." And the parent blows up: "What do you mean, my son's having a hard time in school? There might be something wrong with his teacher, but there's absolutely nothing wrong with my son." There's an immediate sense of denial: I have no problem; it's not me,

it's not my fault. We're born defensive, with an immediate reaction of wanting to protect failure and inadequacy, to hide and defend them, to build walls around them.

The gospel message always begins by saying, "Tear down the defenses, destroy the denial." And because no one wants to hear that, the gospel is always going to make us peculiar and create isolation. Those who have gained power and influence, who have finally just crawled their way to the top of the pile, don't want to hear that they don't have the answers and that their wisdom, authority, and genius are really not worth much. And the ordinary people who are trying to survive don't want radical surgery done because they're terrified of what they'll discover on the inside.

You probably saw some version of the *Christmas Carol* over Christmas. The story of Scrooge is very powerful. I'm convinced that Scrooge may be the most defensive, denial-driven person in literature. He has no needs; he loves money and nothing else. He is completely satisfied with himself. But he lives a horrible life and has no clue that it is so. Then Jacob Marley comes and says, "Scrooge, you don't want to end up like me. It's too late for me, but it's not too late for you." And the three ghosts of past, present, and future Christmases come to Scrooge, and they batter against the denial. He remembers that once he loved somebody, and he realizes that in the present people love each other still. He looks at his own grave and realizes that the day is coming when it will be too late for him. He awakens in the morning with the denial finally battered down, saying, "I need help! I am not what I ought to be. I am a miserable, wizened, cruel, hurting person."

The gospel starts by saying to people, "You need help. It doesn't matter who you are, you're not good enough." For that reason it will always be hard for us to begin the story of the love of God. It will never be a popular message. So we have to decide that we, like Paul, will not be ashamed of it, because there is no other place to go. We have to tell the story of human need, and we have to be about destroying denial as the first step in getting help for ourselves or anyone else.

Notice, too, that Paul in the opening chapters of Romans is systematic and comprehensive in destroying everyone's defenses. One of the strengths of the opening chapters of Romans is the defenses of especially conservative, religious, Bible-believing people. It is disquieting to read chapters 2 and 3 of Romans when you realize how much modern evangelical Christians are like the Jews of Paul's day, who knew the Law, loved it, proclaimed it, delighted in it--and broke it.

## **GOD'S POWER FOR SALVATION**

The second phrase in verse 16 announces that the gospel is the power of God for salvation. The key word here is the word power. Once defenses are down and need is acknowledged what we need is power to change. And the gospel alone supplies the power of God to become different. A great number of people have been through the experience of having been miserable and not understanding why, having had horrible patterns of defeat and foolishness that they fell into over and over again and never had any clue as to why they were the way they were--and then finally, helpfully, they had someone explain it to them.

I've heard people rhapsodize about *Bradshaw on the Family* on PBS. Bradshaw is a thoughtful, articulate, bright, winsome man who talks through his own life and his experience of a dysfunctional family with alcoholism and terrible experiences growing up, and how such dysfunction can destroy the child within a person. All of that, as he beautifully articulates it, describes the experience of many listeners. And for the first time they say, "Oh my goodness, somebody understands me. I never knew why I was like this. It's wonderful! I see myself so clearly now." They are euphoric about having the problems finally explained because it seems to mean they're going to change. They enthusiastically set off fueled by all this knowledge and analysis, but wake up sometime and say, "I can explain myself (in fact I'm glad to explain myself at great length to anybody who will listen!), but I haven't really changed." That is because there is no power in the analysis to bring about real life-long change.

Many other generations have experienced the same thing. When Sigmund Freud first began to talk about the unseen forces at work within people and psychoanalysis, his ideas were embraced around the world. Here was an explanation for a lot of the difficult psychological problems people had. And yet those who embrace

psychoanalysis just by itself don't find that there is power to change.

Karl Marx attempted explanations for human misery that had to do with struggle between economic classes; and hundreds of thousands of people around the world said, "Yes, this explains it. I'm poor, and the class of which I am a member has been taken advantage of. But we'll fight back and change the world, and everything will be different."

The same is true for much feminist thought, with its analysis of problems that exist between men and women. But ultimately, having analyzed the problem, countless women admit, "I'm still miserable, and I'm still doing the same things, and I'm still feeling the same way. I have great descriptive language, but I can't change."

It probably was true in ancient cultures going back as far as we can imagine in the story of humanity. The elders, the witch doctor, or somebody could help explain to the next generation why they were the way they were. But analysis by itself is not powerful.

I think this is one of the reasons why rap music is so entrenched in urban settings. It's why language that is misogynistic and filled with hate and violence---killing cops and raping women and all kinds of horrible things-is embraced and defended by some in this culture. These songwriters are describing something that people are really going through. There are folks who live in terrible circumstances exactly like that. It's very powerful for somebody to give voice to what people are experiencing

What Paul is saying is that the gospel is the power of God for salvation. What is unique in this explanation of humanity is that God has done something, has joined us on this earth and will join us in our hearts, will change what is inside us, will grant us his power to ultimately become different people. It's a process, Paul says later, "from faith to faith." It's not shallow or done quickly; there's growth. And there is genuine power that comes from heaven itself. That is what is unique about the message and that is again why he says he is not ashamed of it.

## **FOR ALL WHO BELIEVE**

The third statement in verse 16 is that the gospel, the power of God for salvation, is for everybody: "...to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." Look back at verse 14, where Paul says, "I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish." He means everybody. The ancient city of Rome was an unbelievable stew of races, slaves and free, cultures, languages-people from everywhere. Rome drew them like a magnet. In the paragraph in verses 8 to 14 of Romans, Paul is saying he can't wait to come to Rome because he wants to be part of what God is doing in the church there, to receive a blessing and bring a blessing. And that church in Rome was made up of every kind of person.

We live in a disintegrating world that is becoming tribalized. Increasing isolation takes place as people huddle in groups defined by race, ethnic background, age, gender, etc. More and more people want to know only people who are like themselves and find themselves increasingly paranoid about everybody else. The school systems and others are attempting to overcome this by championing multiculturalism, saying that everybody is as good as everybody else; every culture, every work of art, every history, every memory, every place ought to be celebrated as equally wonderful. I'm convinced that this effort, like others that want to draw only on human strength to fix human problems, is doomed.

But there is a basis on which all of us can be united, find common ground, break down barriers, stand arm-in-arm, and experience real love for one another. That basis is not that we're all equally wonderful, but that we're all equally desperate for the love of God; we have no other place to turn. We stand the same in that regard. There ought to be no distinctions between us because we're all in as much need of God's grace as everyone else. The gospel is the power of God for salvation for everybody.

We need to be careful here; Paul does say salvation begins with the Jews. Not every religion is equal to every other religion. There is a stream in history through which God has made himself known in the Old Testament: the line of Abraham and his people, the laws that were given, and the Savior who would come. The gospel

came from a particular people. But they are no better off, no more exalted, and it's very clear in the next couple of chapters, no less in need. No one has any basis for pride. The possibility of knowing and loving each other, or being united, comes because we all have the same disease, and require the same cure. It's on that basis that we can have some hope, at least in the church, that the things that create barriers for other people need not create them for us.

## **TO LIVE BY FAITH**

The fourth and final phrase, which I just want to mention, is at the end of verse 17: "...the righteous [one] shall live by faith." Essentially the point he is making here is that this gospel of which we have been speaking is a gift from God; it cannot be earned or deserved. It has nothing to do with how qualified you are: what you look like, how old or young you are, how much money you have, what your name is, what your history is, where you're from, how accomplished you are, or anything else. The gospel is simply a choice of faith, to believe what God has done. That is the key to everything. Whatever the outside of you looks like doesn't matter; the inside is where God will begin his work. That's what Paul means when he quotes Habakkuk 2:4: "The righteous [one] shall live by faith."

We live in very turbulent, difficult times. There is a lot of reason to think they will get worse. Most studies that I know about express grave alarm about the plight of this generation of children and what they're going to grow up to experience. The struggles around the globe show no particular inclination to solve themselves anytime soon. And let's not forget those who live near us, who, for instance, once were married and now, with family and marriage and life blown apart, are lost and frightened because they have no support external to them. They want a basis on which to proceed, ethical standards to live by, and they don't know where to turn anymore for them. We live in a world in which the anxiety level of the ordinary person is rising every day.

And yet there is a secure place on which to put our crutches down, a platform that will support our weight, from which we can make sense of life and offer wisdom to other people: the gospel of God, predicted by the prophets, tested by history, and given an authoritative spokesman.

I had a wonderful time at the Christmas Eve service here. We had Christmas music and children singing. At the end of it Ron Ritchie came up on the platform dressed in a shepherd outfit and talked about the experience of shepherds who heard the word of an angel. I was reminded that many people who don't really know much else about the Christian message might have heard these words, just because of the songs that are sung at Christmas. Let me read them to you again. This happened in the dark of night to poor men who were under the thumb of a foreign dictatorship, whose lives were routine, whose circumstances had nothing to do with hope for the future. Angels appeared gloriously in the heavens and said to the shepherds, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news [that's the same word from which we get the word gospel] of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

The news is very good. It is for everybody. It is filled with joy. We have a word to support us, to believe in. We have an opportunity in the same way that the angels poured light into the experience of those shepherds, to tell the truth, to offer a hurting world around us the reasons for hope that we have.

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Catalog No. 4289  
Romans 1:1-17  
First Message  
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January 3, 1993

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