

# THE GOSPEL OF GOD

## Study Two

### THE GOSPEL OF GOD CONCERNING HIS SON: ROMANS

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#### WHAT IS 'THE GOSPEL'?

Paul the apostle knew himself called to be an announcer of the gospel:

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God . . . the gospel concerning his Son . . . (Rom. 1:1, 3).

For this gospel Paul made great claims:

I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith (Rom. 1:16).

Paul referred to:

the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all (Rom. 2:16; compare Acts 17:31).

He considered that his ministry of the gospel was able to make the Gentile nations, whom he had characterised as 'foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless' (Rom. 1:31), into an offering acceptable to God, as he spoke of:

the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 15:15–16).

This is because:

God . . . is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ . . . to bring about the obedience of faith (Rom. 16:25–26).

We begin to get a sense of what the gospel is in relation to God, and what God is doing through it.

Our interest in this study will be in the content of the gospel message. We will attempt to see what the apostles actually said when they proclaimed the gospel. But first we need to ask

what was meant and understood by the use of the word ‘gospel’ (Greek: εὐαγγέλιον, *euaggelion*)?

### **Question for discussion**

- *What would we say ‘the gospel’ is?*

## **Greek and Roman Background <sup>1</sup>**

*Euaggelion* was a technical term for ‘news of victory’ in battle. A messenger would appear, raise his right hand, and call out, ‘Rejoice! We are victorious!’ Celebrations were held and sacrifices offered. Something of this comes through in Paul’s description of the progress of the gospel:

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life (2 Cor. 2:14–16).

Here the announcement is life-giving to those for whom the victory has been won, but deadly for the conquered captives in the victory procession.

*Euaggelion* was also used as a technical term in connection with the cult of the Roman emperor, who was regarded as a divine personage, whose power over humans, animals, earth and sea brought good fortune and made him saviour of the world and redeemer of individuals. The *euaggelia* were the welcome announcements of his birth, coming of age, and accession, and the annual festivals that accompanied them.

The bold use of this word, with its connotations of power, acclamation, victory, rejoicing and hope, to designate the announcement of God’s rule over all in Jesus the Messiah signified it was more than just ‘good news’ for believers. It was saying that ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah’, who is now ‘King of kings and Lord of lords’, with ‘all things in subjection under his feet’—enemies included (Rev. 11:15; 19:16; 1 Cor. 15:25–27).

## **Old Testament Background**

In the face of apostasy, judgement and defeat in Israel, Isaiah was given the picture of a welcome announcement of God:

How beautiful upon the mountains  
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,  
who brings good news,  
who announces salvation,  
who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns’ (Isa. 52:7).

This announcement heralds the coming of God Himself:

Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,  
together they sing for joy;

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<sup>1</sup> For this section see Donald Robinson, *Faith’s Framework: The Structure of New Testament Theology* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1996), pp. 49–54.

for in plain sight they see  
the return of the LORD to Zion.  
Break forth together into singing,  
you ruins of Jerusalem;  
for the LORD has comforted his people,  
he has redeemed Jerusalem.  
The LORD has bared his holy arm  
before the eyes of all the nations;  
and all the ends of the earth shall see  
the salvation of our God (Isa. 52:8–10).

This immediately precedes and climaxes in the strange depiction of the suffering servant of the Lord in Isaiah 52:13–53:12.

A similar welcome announcement comes particularly to the poor and oppressed:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,  
because the LORD has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,  
and the day of vengeance of our God;  
to comfort all who mourn;  
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—  
to give them a garland instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.  
They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory (Isa. 61:1–3).

The one speaking here is an anointed conqueror, in a presentation that parallels that of the suffering servant.<sup>2</sup>

## Jesus and the Announcement of God's Reign

Jesus in himself gathers these two figures and their announcement into one. For him, the gospel is the effectual announcement of the saving kingdom-rule of God:

Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news' (Mark 1:14–15).

Jesus applied the prophecy of Isaiah 61 directly to himself:

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,

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<sup>2</sup> See J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1993), pp. 489–90.

to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'  
And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing' (Luke 4:14–21).

It is emphasised that this comes particularly to the poor and oppressed:

Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God (Luke 6:20).

This coming of the gospel to those who are in a disadvantaged situation is a sure sign of the coming of God's saving kingdom-rule, and of the action of the true king. As Jesus sent word in answer to an enquiry from John the Baptist:

Go and tell John what you have seen and heard . . . the poor have good news brought to them (Luke 7:22).

For Jesus, the gospel, in word and deed, was 'the good news of the kingdom' of his Father:

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people (Matt. 4:23; compare 6:32–33; 9:35; 10:7; 24:14; Luke 16:16. See also Mark 4:11, 26, 30).

After his death and resurrection, when it was seen that 'the kingdom of God has come with power' (Mark 9:1), Jesus continued with his disciples 'speaking about the kingdom of God' (Acts 1:3).

## **The Apostles and Paul**

During his ministry Jesus had sent the twelve apostles out with the gospel:

As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons (Matt. 10:7–8).

A good summary of what happened after Jesus ascended is found in the longer ending of Mark's gospel:

So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it (Mark 16:19–20).

In the Acts of the Apostles, it is still the gospel of the kingdom:

But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women (Acts 8:12).

He entered the synagogue and for three months spoke out boldly, and argued persuasively about the kingdom of God (Acts 19:8; compare Acts 20:24–25, where 'to testify to the good news of God's grace' is equivalent to 'proclaiming the kingdom').

From morning until evening he explained the matter to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets (Acts 28:23).

proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance (Acts 28:31).

The difference is that the Messiah-king is now in place, ruling with power. Peter announced on the day of Pentecost:

Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know—this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power . . . Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified (Acts 2:22–24, 36).

Paul, from the time of his conversion, was no less centred on the Messiah-ship of Jesus:

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God’ . . . Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah (Acts 9:19–20, 22).

The good news is that the action of the kingship established by God in Jesus is a saving action:

And we bring you the good news that what God promised to our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising Jesus . . . Let it be known to you therefore, my brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you; by this Jesus everyone who believes is set free from all those sins from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses (Acts 13:32–33, 38–39).

Jesus’ Lordship also relates to God’s coming judgement on the world and on ‘this corrupt generation’ (Acts 2:40), which makes the promulgation of this gospel announcement particularly urgent:

While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:30–31).

A final reference to the ‘eternal gospel’ occurs in Revelation:

Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and tongue and people; and he said with a loud voice, ‘Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the fountains of water’ (Rev. 14:6–7).

We may wonder whether this proclamation of the gospel is of the same order as those we have been looking at. But it fits with what we have seen: a time of judgement has been set, and it has been made possible for human beings now to turn and ‘Fear God and give him glory’, and to come and worship Him as the Creator of all.

## **Gospel and Kingdom**

Since our examination of the nature of the gospel has led us to its link with the kingdom of God, we need also to have some understanding of what is meant by ‘the kingdom of God’. It is, first of all, God’s sovereign rule over all that He has made:

his kingdom rules over all (Ps. 103:19).

This is in the face of the sinful opposition of the nations and their rulers to the authority of God:

Why do the nations conspire,  
and the peoples plot in vain?  
The kings of the earth set themselves,  
and the rulers take counsel together,  
against the LORD and his anointed, saying,  
‘Let us burst their bonds asunder,  
and cast their cords from us’ (Ps. 2:1–3).

God promised an offspring to David (about 1,000 BC), of whom God says:

I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me (2 Sam. 7:13–14).

For his throne to be established for ever (compare John 12:34: ‘We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever’), he will need to have dealt with the obstacle of death. So astounding was this promise, David recognised it as God’s ‘charter for humanity’ (2 Sam. 7:19).<sup>3</sup> The setting-up of this kingdom will be a saving action on the part of God:

I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them (Ezek. 34:22–24).

The coming of Jesus fulfilled this promise. As the angel Gabriel said to Mary:

And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end (Luke 1:31–33).

This is the kingdom Jesus announced, preceded by John the Baptist:

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near’ . . . From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near’ (Matt. 3:1–2; 4:17).

This kingdom was the import of his words and actions:

Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom (Luke 12:32).

What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? (Luke 13:18).

But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you (Luke 11:20).

Once it was fulfilled in his death and resurrection, Jesus gave ‘instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles . . . speaking about the kingdom of God’ (Acts 1:2, 3). Matthew summarises these instructions:

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<sup>3</sup> Literal translation; see Martin Bleby, ‘The Agenda for History’, in *They Will Reign on Earth: Christ’s Kingly Community*, NCTM Ministry School 2007, NCPI, Blackwood, 2007, pp. 47–54.

And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age’ (Matt. 28:18–20).

Jesus made clear that the kingdom is the rule of his Father, who sets its times and seasons (see Acts 1:7). Paul in Athens set out the dimensions and purpose of this kingdom-action—for all nations to come to relate with God as Father—and declares that this has now reached a crucial stage: the time for ‘all people everywhere to repent’ (see Acts 17:24–31). This corresponds with the culmination of Psalm 2:

Now therefore, O kings, be wise;  
be warned, O rulers of the earth.  
Serve the LORD with fear,  
with trembling kiss his feet,  
or he will be angry, and you will perish in the way;  
for his wrath is quickly kindled.  
Happy are all who take refuge in him (Ps. 2:10–11).

In God’s plan and purpose, this kingdom has a future as well as a present dimension. The kingdom of God that has come upon us in Jesus is going to issue in ‘new heavens and a new earth’—a renewed creation—‘where righteousness dwells’ (2 Pet. 3:13; compare Isa. 65:17; 66:22–23). We will all be raised from the dead with renewed bodies (see 1 Cor. 15:20–28, 35–57), and all who belong to Jesus will live and operate with him in that kingdom-reign for ever. In that new creation ‘Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more’ (Rev. 21:4)—there will be no more tears, nor any cause for them. There will be no more disease, nor anything evil or unclean, in the final kingdom of God. So sure was this outcome, once Jesus had come, that God gave foretastes, or anticipations in advance, of what we will be like in our resurrection bodies—to encourage faith now in the sureness of what it will be like then. The healings and deliverances that came through Jesus and the apostles were not just for here and now. They were a breaking-in of God’s reign and rule now, as sure and certain signs, with a view to the final reality of God’s kingdom that is to come in the future.

This is the saving kingdom-action of God that Paul and the others were now proclaiming in the gospel.

### **Question for discussion**

- *What difference does this view of the kingdom of God make in our understanding of the gospel and its operation?*

## **THE GOSPEL MESSAGE**

We turn now to the content of the gospel message. We will attempt to see what the apostles actually said when they proclaimed the gospel. We may have some notion of what the ‘gospel’ is—we may even have an outline in our minds that we use in evangelising. It would be interesting to compare what we say with the way the apostles presented it.

### **Questions for discussion**

- *What is the gospel, as we have understood it? What would we include when we present the gospel to another person?*

## **Romans 1:1-7**

We will focus on Paul's presentation of the gospel in the letter to the Romans, particularly on the first seven verses of Romans 1:

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh, and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Our examination of the nature of the gospel in connection with the kingdom of God has set the context in which elements of this gospel outline can be identified and appreciated. 'Jesus *Christ*' identifies Jesus as the Messiah, as does 'promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures'. So also does the designation of Jesus as 'Son of God' and 'descended from David', and the linking of Jesus' Sonship with his overcoming of death. The reference to the Gentile nations indicate the scope of God's reign in His Messiah. Allusions to obedience of faith, to holiness ('saints', meaning 'holy ones'), and to being God's beloved, to grace, peace, and a relationship with God as 'our Father', point to the saving and transformative power of the gospel announcement.

Already it would be instructive to compare what Paul says here with presentations of the gospel that we have known or practised.

### **Questions for discussion**

- *What elements do we find here? How are these the same as elements of gospel presentation that we have experienced? How are they different?*
- *What difference could this make to the way we present the gospel?*

## **The Rest of the Letter to the Romans**

Paul's introductory summary of the gospel in Romans 1:1–7 is expanded in the rest of the letter, often in considerable detail, and sometimes with other elements added.

In 1:16–17, Paul recognises the gospel as the saving power of God, for Jews and non-Jews alike, as it reveals the righteousness of God for those who live by faith.

This righteousness is first spelled out as 'the wrath of God . . . against all ungodliness and wickedness' (Rom. 1:18). As God gives people over to their refusal to 'honor him as God or give thanks to him', and to the irrational and debased idolatry that arises from this, their wickedness comes out as impurity, perversion, and all kinds of evil, which are blatantly and defiantly endorsed by their practitioners (see Rom. 1:18–32). Those who profess religion and adherence to the law of God, in so far as their observance of outward requirements does not prevent their inward disposition from coming out in sinful practice are in no better condition (see Rom. 2:1–29). Paul concludes that 'all . . . are under the power of sin' (Rom. 3:9), and



that God's law in this situation merely compounds the experience of sin and guilt (see Rom. 1:1–20).

Paul then declares the saving righteousness of God 'through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement ['a propitiation', KJV] by his blood' (Rom. 3:24–25), which is received as justifying grace by those who have faith in Jesus. This is 'attested by the law and the prophets' (Rom. 3:21) of the scriptures (see Rom. 3:21–26).

Abraham and David are then cited to show how God 'justifies the ungodly', whether Jewish or non-Jewish, by the not-reckoning of sin and the reckoning of righteousness to those who believe in Jesus 'who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification' (Rom. 4:25; see 3:27–4:25).

Paul shows how this justifying action of God sets us outside of sinful humanity in Adam and places us in 'the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness' (Rom. 5:17) that is in Christ, 'leading to eternal life' (Rom 5:21; see 5:1–21).

Our participation in Christ's death for us ends sin's dominion over us, to free us to live in righteousness, in the assurance of our participation in his resurrected life (see Rom. 6:1–23). This is notwithstanding the reality that in our flesh we remain powerless of ourselves to do anything good, which requires that we live 'in the new life of the Spirit' (Rom. 7:6; see 7:1–25). This 'new life of the Spirit' is expounded, with its freedom from the condemnation of God's law, an ability to 'set the mind on the Spirit' which is 'life and peace' (Rom. 8:6), a relationship with God as 'Father!' (Rom. 8:15), and a promise of resurrection that encompasses not just us but the whole of creation, such that nothing 'will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom. 8:39; see 8:1–39).

Paul then demonstrates that God's purpose for Israel and all the nations—'the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God' in His judgements and His ways (Rom 11:33) is no way derailed by the misplaced resistance of Jews to the gospel, nor by any presumption on the part of the Gentile nations, but rather is enhanced and carried through to its glorious conclusion (see Rom. 9:1–11:36). This panoramic view of history is no less part of Paul's presentation of the gospel.

True worshipful living that flows from these great mercies of God is now set forth, covering every aspect of human life and community (see Rom. 12:1–13:14). In particular, relationships within the fellowship of believers, both Jews and Gentiles, are soundly addressed in the light of God's saving grace to all (see Rom. 14:1–15:13). Paul concludes with personal messages and greetings to those in Rome from himself and others with him, in ways that flesh out the truth and reality of what he has been saying (see Rom. 15:14–16:23), and with a summary ascription of glory to God (Rom. 16:25–27).

We see how far this extends and goes beyond the introductory summary of the gospel with which Paul began in Romans 1:1–7, which was not able, or intended, to encapsulate it all. Even after all of this, Paul still says: '*on some points* I have written to you' (Rom. 15:15). This implies that even the vast canvas of the letter to the Romans does not exhaust the gospel as Paul knew it, of which he prays elsewhere: 'that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with [literally *unto*] all the fullness of God' (Eph. 3:18–19).

### **Question for discussion**

- *Where does this summary of the letter to the Romans leave us with regard to our imparting of the gospel with others?*

## THE GOSPEL IN A BOX?

We could equally look at the content of the addresses in the Acts of the Apostles, go back over the gospel writings, or piece together parts of the apostolic letters, to come up with summary elements of the gospel message—these also would be good exercises.<sup>4</sup>

One hazard of such an exercise is our propensity to look for a formula, which we can learn and then use in presenting the gospel to others. That will prove elusive. It is good for us to be familiar enough with the Scriptures to have in our minds all that the gospel includes, but we will find that it can never be reduced to a formula that is then at our disposal. As we saw last time, we do not wield the gospel—God does. God wields us in the gospel. So knowing the rudiments of the gospel in a reductionist sense is not enough, and may leave us way off beam. We need to know God, and we need to know God knowing us, and then what we say will come out of that, with the power of God. Let us encourage one another in that knowing of God through the gospel!

### *Questions for discussion*

- *What have we known of our propensity to reduce the gospel to a handy formula? How has this served us well? How have we been taken beyond it?*

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<sup>4</sup> This has been done by C. H. Dodd in *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, [1936] 1980); also in Geoffrey C. Bingham, *Proclaiming Christ's Gospel in Today's World* (NCPI, Blackwood, [1986] 2005), see especially pp. 19–20; and in Deane Meatheringham, *Gospel Incandescent* (NCPI, Blackwood, [1981] 2009), especially chapter 1.