

Why We Need the Gospel

SCOTT HOEZEE

The Apostle Paul wrote thirteen epistles or letters in the New Testament. That is almost half of the entire New Testament; but many consider his letter to the Romans to be his magnum opus—his greatest work and theological achievement. As we will see in a new series here on *Groundwork*, Paul very systematically moves through various areas of salvation theology, and he does it so methodically that sometimes you forget this was actually a letter written to people, not a kind of catechism. But it is a letter, written to people whom Paul loved. Today on *Groundwork*, we see where Paul goes first in the letter to the Romans. So, stay tuned.

DARRELL DELANEY

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, this is now the first episode in a planned six-part series on the sixteen-chapter letter to the Christians living in Rome; and of course, there is so much in Romans that we could do a twenty-part series and we still wouldn't cover everything; but we are going to try to do what we can to move through the big movements of this letter to catch the rich theology and the great good gospel news that Paul wants to convey here.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, Paul wrote thirteen letters in the New Testament, and this letter here is one of the shining examples of people having to use this one as a teaching tool. I know I have had a study of the book of Romans when I went to Bible school, and churches and people in small groups have taken this letter as this is how you are supposed to live; this is what you are supposed to understand about the gospel, and Paul lays it out clearly. I wish we could do every single point of it...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

But I would advise people to read the book in its entirety to get the full context, but definitely we are going to hit some points today.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Paul wrote letters of various lengths. There are some very, very short ones, like to Philemon, and some sort of semi-short ones, to like Timothy; but then he has got some longer ones: 1 Corinthians I think may be the longest. That also has sixteen chapters. Romans has sixteen chapters. So, this is definitely one of the biggest ones, and as you just said, it is packed. But before we dive in...today we are going to be looking at Romans 1 through 3—the first three chapters...but before we dive in, let's just step back and look at a couple of big things. First, it is abundantly clear that Paul knows a lot of Christians who are living in Rome. In fact, in the final chapter of Romans, he is going to list a long list of people by name, people he knows and loves; but it is also clear that when Paul wrote this letter, he had not visited Rome yet. He wanted to, and he says at the beginning of Romans that he had had multiple plans to travel to Rome, and his plans got changed every

single time. The book of Acts tells us Paul did get to Rome eventually after surviving a shipwreck that landed him temporarily on the island of Malta, but here are just the last two verses from Acts 28, the last chapter, beginning at verse 30:

For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. ³¹ He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!

DARRELL DELANEY

So, it literally, abruptly ends there in the book of Acts, like you don't get a The End; you don't get an epilogue. We don't hear much about Paul after that. We do know Paul had intentions to get as far as Spain...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

But he never made it to Spain; and in matter of fact, after that verse in Acts Chapter 28, he is going to lose his life...not much longer after that...he is going to lose his life.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Not long...we think that not long after that two-year period Luke mentioned there at the end of Acts 28, the Romans hauled Paul out of the city one day and lopped off his head. That is the story of his martyrdom. So, the city Paul so longed to visit also, it turns out, became the last place where he preached the good news of God's kingdom in Jesus Christ. So, that is just sort of an overview of Paul's relationship; and then next, Darrell, let's think about the structure of Romans.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, the book of Romans in and of itself...and I think that it is fair to say that the *Heidelberg Catechism* had taken its three-part outline from this book...you know: Sin, salvation, service; and the human problem of sin is definitely dealt with in the first three chapters, and that is what we are going to deal with in this episode.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sins first, but then second Paul is going to reveal what God did to address that problem: He saved us by grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus; and then in the third part of Romans, that will be the end of this series, Paul returns to or responds to this great salvation, namely that we live lives of dedicated service. We are grateful for what God did in Jesus, and we show our gratitude through Christian living.

But today, as I said, we are going to look at Romans 1 through 3, and this is where Paul is going to talk about the bad news of sin; and as we listen to this, Darrell, you know, the basic question all of us should have is why do we need the gospel? Why is the gospel so relevant to my life? Well, Paul is going to talk about that; but first, listen to this wonderful summary of the gospel in Romans 1:14-17, where Paul writes:

I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. ¹⁵That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome. ¹⁶For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. ¹⁷For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

DARRELL DELANEY

So, Paul makes it clear in this verse why we need the gospel. It is the power of salvation for those who believe, and we need to be saved from something; and that is what Paul wants to talk about: What is it that we need to be saved from? What is this sin problem? He begins to tell us what that is in this chapter.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The writer Frederick Buechner once said that if the gospel preaches a sheltering word, it is received the most eagerly by people who have already figured out: Hey, somebody blew the roof off my house. I need a shelter

because the roof was blown off my house. Paul here is going to blow the roof off our house, and he does it beginning in verse 18.

DARRELL DELANEY

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. ²¹For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²²Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Nothing subtle about that. Humanity, Paul says, is without excuse. If you claim that you had no way to know that there is a good and holy God that exists somewhere; no. You do know that. Everybody knows that, Paul says. Instead, we suppressed the truth. That is a very, very famous line from Romans 1:18: We suppressed the truth. We locked the truth up in chains. We stuffed the truth into a dark closet in our hearts, and pretended it just didn't even exist in our everyday lives. We fancied ourselves as being mature, wise people; but no, we were fools; and you know, everybody has this deep-down desire to worship something, right? Paul says: Yes, and that is supposed to be directed to God; and instead, you directed it to, you know, people or to golden statues. You worshipped trees, or you worshipped cats...you thought a cat was your god. We are really bad off; we are quite thoroughly mired in sin, is the point.

DARRELL DELANEY

You know, Psalm 19 alludes to this: The heavens declare the glory of God... ²Day and night they pour forth speech... So, you cannot act like you didn't see that...you didn't know that. Every time you open your eyes, it is right there in plain truth; and Paul is going to continue to talk about what this means, even deeper when we go into the next segment. So, stay tuned.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Darrell Delaney, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this first program of a six-part series on the book of Romans; and we are covering Chapters 1, 2, and 3 in this program. As we ended the previous segment, and we got to the end of Chapter 1, we got to what the Reformer John Calvin called total depravity. We are stuck, Paul says; we are mired in sin; and Paul is going to kind of double down on that now as we move into Romans 2.

DARRELL DELANEY

When we look at how Paul begins the letter, you cannot tell he is going to go this way, because it is so warm...it is so welcoming. He does this a lot, where he does a warm greeting in all of his books, except Galatians, where he was literally frustrated and he got right to it, but he starts this letter very warmly. If you want to read it, it picks up at verse 8. It says: First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. ⁹God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you ¹⁰in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

A warm, effusive greeting; and that is why it is rather bracing. At the end of Chapter 1, we just saw it was kind of a general indictment of humanity, right?

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I mean, just everybody is without excuse; but now, as we move into Chapter 2, Paul is going to kind of go after something that is very specific, apparently, to Rome. Now, Rome was a Gentile city, non-Jewish for the most part, but there were Jews who had come to know Jesus also in the Roman church, and so Paul is going to talk to both Jews and non-Jews in what is to come. He kind of starts with his fellow Jews, and it looks like he is targeting something that has him really upset. He writes this in Chapter 2:

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. ³Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. ³So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? ⁴Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance? ⁵But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. ⁶ God will repay each person according to what they have done.

DARRELL DELANEY

We actually are reminded of the time when Moses brought the law to the Israelites, and because they were already messing it up...they were having a party...they had a golden calf...Moses broke those. God was like: No, you cannot do that because now they don't know what sin is. But now, they have an opportunity to learn through the law what sin is, but that law was never going to bring them righteousness.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That was a point of confusion all along. The law was given for what you just said, you know; well, a couple different things; but one is to reveal sin, the other is to reveal a better way to live, right? I mean, so a conviction but also the blueprint for creation. The law is like the owner's manual for creation...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, it tells you how things go best. God wants us to live inside the boundary lines that he created because that is where we can flourish. Step outside of that, people get hurt. But eventually, and it actually didn't take long, people started to think that the law was given as the *way* to salvation. Like, if we keep this perfectly, then we will get saved—then God punches our entry ticket to heaven that we earn on our own; and Paul is going to make the very big point in this part of Romans, that was never what the law was supposed to do. You were never supposed to think: Oh, if I just do this, I can save myself. Nope! That was not the law's function.

DARRELL DELANEY

The law was never designed to make you have your own righteousness. There will be no one in heaven saying: Yup, I checked every one of them, and now I am here because of my own ability, because can we even do things perfectly? We kind of find out the hard way that we don't; and actually, in Hebrews Chapter 10 it refers to this, that the law was given, but it wasn't designed to cleanse the consciousness of the believer. It wasn't designed to remove the sin guilt. Only Jesus Christ can do that through grace by faith. That is a spoiler because that is where we are headed.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is like the rich young man who comes to Jesus, you know: Hey, I kept all the law, so ta-da! What do I lack? Jesus says: Well, one more thing; and Jesus will always be able to say one more thing to each of us, no matter how good we have lived; and it is not going to be the same thing for you as it is for me, and it was

something different for the rich young man. That wasn't what the law was supposed to do. So, that is a big point; but specifically here in Romans 2, what seems to upset Paul is people who act all highfaluting and snooty, and they judge other people, and then, Paul says, but you are doing it, too. So, who are you to talk, you know; who are you to talk? You look good on the outside, but that doesn't earn any points with God, when in your heart you have rage and bitterness and pride and envy. This is how the next part that he says in verse 28 of Chapter 2:

A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. ²⁹No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, Paul is making this point that just because you follow this law to a T, if your heart isn't in it and you end up actually doing the same things, you are a hypocrite...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

And that is not what you are supposed to do; and Jesus actually had rebuked the Pharisees for this in his day. He called them whitewashed tombs because they looked great on the outside, but their hearts were dirty; and so, God is trying to help us understand that it is not going to be about you: 1) Following this law to a T; and 2) Judging others whom you think are not following the law to the letter T. It is about you being humble and realizing that we are all unrighteous, under sin, which is where Paul is headed.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the specifics of this we don't know, as we pointed out so often here on *Groundwork*, Darrell. Whenever we read the letters of the New Testament, we are reading somebody else's mail, you know. It is sort of like after your grandma died, you find some letters that she and her sister had exchanged. So, letters between your grandma and your aunt. So, you pick one of those letters up out of a shoebox in the attic after Grandma dies, and her sister had written her a letter saying that she shares Grandma's concerns about Phil; and oh, by the way, thanks for that great recipe you sent. Okay; so, that is the letter from your aunt to your grandma, but just reading that much doesn't tell you who Phil was, what was concerning about him, or whether the recipe was for a cherry tart or a pot roast, right? You have to do some digging to figure that out. So, what exactly was going on that these people were being only outwardly pious, but inwardly not so much? We are not quite sure, but clearly Paul had gotten wind of some bad stuff going on.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, sometimes we won't have the specific context of the things that are happening that Paul is addressing. Like in Corinthians, he says: About those things you wrote me about...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right.

DARRELL DELANEY

We will never know what those things were, but what the Holy Spirit has done in his wisdom has given us the essence of what was important so that we can live from it and learn from it...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

Like what he is teaching us in Romans 2; so not only does he continue to lay into his fellow Jews, he feels he has the ability to speak into that because he is a Jew, and he continues to talk about the practices that they do

in the middle of Chapter 2, where he says:

²¹You, then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? ²²You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? ²⁴As it is written: “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”

So, he understands that the original plan for God’s people was for them to be cross-cultural missionaries and to allow God’s truth to come to them, but they have not held that responsibility of being a light and witness they are called to, and Paul is calling them out for it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes...and is this really happening, where people were literally stealing, committing adultery left and right, robbing temples, or is this a little hyperbole...a little exaggeration? You know, sort of like Jesus saying: Hey, if you had a lodge pole pine tree sticking out of your eye, what are you doing picking sawdust out of somebody else’s eye? Paul may be going to rhetorical extremes here, but the point is clear enough: God does not want us to look good on the outside; we have to be good on the inside. God wants us to be transformed, and there is only one way that is going to happen, and it is not by our trying to keep the law; and Paul is going to get around to that in Romans 3, so stay tuned.

Segment 3

DARRELL DELANEY

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, in this first episode on the letter to the Romans, we are in the bad news section; but as we turn the corner now into Chapter 3, Paul first doubles down a bit on everything that we just saw. He says in Chapter 3:10...a very famous verse that some of us know well: As it is written: “There is no one righteous, not even one; ¹¹there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. ¹²All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.”

You know, Darrell, you get the feeling that at this point in Romans, Paul wants the reader to say: Well, good grief! Is there any hope? I am getting desperate here.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, I think Paul is using his own argument, because in Chapter 1 he says that all mouths should be stopped and all people held accountable to a holy God. We are without excuse. He is drilling this point down so that we can actually come to the realization that, oh, yeah, we are guilty. We have no excuse. What are we going to do? Then he turns the corner to the good news. If you don’t realize the bad news is bad, the good news won’t be good.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Now, that is good; Chapter 3:21: But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²²This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, I know that we are going to get into the next episode, where we talk about this beautiful doctrine called justification by faith and faith alone. Paul is laying the foundation for that. You will want to stay tuned for that next episode; but suffice it to say, in this episode, Paul is showing us that now that we understand that the law cannot save us, even if we follow it to the letter, and even though we try to follow it to the letter, our hearts still need addressing, he is showing us here that there is a way for that to happen, and this is the place where it gets real practical, Scott.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Indeed; why is the gospel relevant to my life? Why do I need the gospel? Well, Paul has made that pretty clear now. Two takeaways for this: First observation is that these first three chapters in Romans touch on something that is touchy. You know, Darrell, in more recent times, like when you and I were in college and seminary in the 1980s and 1990s, there was this seeker sensitive movement in American churches, and one of the hallmarks of that was the idea that, you know, talking about sin is a downer—it is a turn off; it is not seeker friendly; and so, even some churches that had traditionally had in their Sunday order of worship something called *confession and assurance of pardon*, they started to drop it, and they dropped, you know, sin talk; and you know, sermons maybe shifted to be a little bit more motivational speech or practical sermons, because, you just gotta stay away from sin. Well, Darrell, I think we could admit there have been preachers and others in the history of the Church who have been heavy-handed, harsh with sin, and maybe that is an extreme, but the solution cannot be to go to the other extreme and we just delete sin talk all together. We cannot do that.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, what we have seen when we studied these things is that when they stop talking about sin and the problem of sin and how that is part of our lives and we need repentance and salvation and deliverance, they replaced it with: Oh, this is life enhancement; oh, your life is better; God has a plan for you; he wants to bless you; he wants to help you; he wants to make you prosper. Then prosperity gospel hijacks that, and now we've got something that is moving us further and further away from the truth of the gospel. But Paul knows this, and this is actually the, I think, a secret weapon that shouldn't be secret, but it is a secret weapon; but we need to get back to understanding the importance of the power of the law, so that we know that we need salvation; and once we realize that, then we can get to the good news that we need.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; Barbara Brown Taylor had a book some years ago titled: *Speaking of Sin*, and one of the chapters in that book had a very provocative title: Sin is Our Only Hope. Now, we don't usually put sin and hope in the same sentence, but her point was that we have to know our sin because that then gives us eagerness to open the floodgates of grace that alone can deal with it. It is just a very, very important first thing to acknowledge so that the good news of the gospel is even better, right? We are even happier to get it.

Then finally, in closing, a second thing to note is that if naming our sin makes us throw ourselves on God's mercy, then our great relief at being saved by grace alone through faith alone, that is the greatest gratitude generator in the world. I mean, when you really understand how bad off you were, and when you really understand the miracle of God coming to get you anyway, you are thankful.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, it is really a beautiful testimony for us if we just look back at our life, and looking back at what we used to do and how we used to behave; and then when we see the God who loves us so much intervene into that situation, even though he knows at that moment we don't want to hear it; we don't want to have anything to do with it; when he does that and shows us the full extent of his love anyway, the proper response to that is gratitude. When I found out how much God loved me, it just broke me and brought me to tears, because I am like, man, he just went through all of that for me?! He went through all of that for us?! So, why wouldn't you want to serve a God like that?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; ironically, it brings us back to the law. Paul has been making clear here, the law was never meant to save you. The law had two main functions: One, to restrain sin...check it. The second was to name sin and lead you to repentance. But in the Reformed tradition, we have come to have a third use of the law, and that is that it is the blueprint for that grateful life you were just talking about. It is a blueprint for discipleship. So, the law brings us to our knees in repentance, but once God lifts us off our knees, then the law becomes like the roadmap.

So, uncomfortable things here in Romans 1 through 3, but they lead us to the gospel...they lead us back to Romans 1:16:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes. Thanks be to God.

DARRELL DELANEY

Thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Darrell Delaney with Scott Hoezee; and we hope you will join us again next time as we study what Paul teaches in Romans Chapters 4 through 7.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

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