

## The Bible (Unmuted) Transcript

### Episode 10

### Romans: Introduction, Part 1

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#### Episode Summary:

In this episode, Matthew kicks off his extended series through the book of Romans. In this first installment, Matthew focuses on Romans 1:1. Specifically, he talks about Paul's calling as an apostle and his Damascus Road experience of the risen Christ. The remainder of the time is spent unpacking what Paul meant by "gospel" (Rom 1:1). To guide us in this investigation, Matthew points listeners to an ancient inscription -- the so-called "Priene Inscription," which was written around 9 BC. Arguably, this inscription offers important insights into how people of the first century thought about, and used, the word "gospel." As a result, it helps us modern readers contextualize the New Testament's use of the word, too.

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#### Transcript:

Welcome back to another episode of The Bible Unmuted. Today we're going to dive into a new series through the Book of Romans. They say that this is Paul's most famous letter, and I think that's probably a good description. As we work through the text of Romans, we're going to mix it up quite a bit. We're going to study Romans verse by verse, we'll follow its narrative flow through each and every chapter, but our study will also be theological. That is to say, as we walk down the winding road of Romans, we will take frequent pauses to contemplate the landscape. And when we come across interesting words and concepts, we'll give ourselves permission to stop and investigate. We will not take anything for granted. We're going to ask questions and we're going to seek answers. So for example, when we come to a word like gospel, we won't assume that our preconceived ideas about that word are unworthy of further clarification. Like me, I bet you've heard the word "gospel" a million times and when you come across the term in Romans, you may be tempted to not give it a second thought. But perhaps a second thought is needed. Perhaps there's more yet to discover about this word. Which, in my opinion, suffers terribly from clichéd overuse. Or take the word "wrath". A lot of Christians think they know what it means. And perhaps they do. But what if there's more yet to be explored with this word, as well. I mean, it's at least worth asking the question; given that the word itself is frequently employed, if not just in Paul's writing, but also in sermons and books that we read today. And too, given that we know from scripture that God is a God of love, (in fact, God is love), shouldn't that fact alone cause us to pause and contemplate what exactly the bible also means by God's wrath? What is the relationship between divine wrath and divine love? I mean, if God is love, this means that love is not something God does from time to time; to the contrary, it's something that God is all the time. So, in other words, God can't not love. And if that's true, then what about divine wrath? How does that relate to divine love? And this is what I mean when I say that our exploration into the text of Romans will be theological. We will aim for coherence of thought and consistency in belief. We will take Paul's words, phrases, his concepts and terms, and give them a thorough MRI so that we can know exactly what he means by each one. So, consider this study in Romans to be an exegetical and theological exploration.

2:49 Alright, let's dive into the text. Today we will be looking at Romans, Chapter 1, verses 1-7 which is the opening introduction. We will only have time to look at verse one, but in future episodes, we'll tackle larger sections of scripture. I want to take the time today to unpack two things today from verse one in order to set the stage for later discussions. Okay, so I will read this passage – verses 1-7 – from the New Revised Standard Version. It goes like this:

**1** Paul, a servant<sup>a</sup> of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, **2** which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, **3** the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh **4** 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, **5** 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, **6** including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,**7** 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.

This is a dense passage, to say the least. I want to begin by talking about that phrase “called to be an apostle”. So, Paul seems to be referring here to the experience he had when he was on the Damascus Road. It was there, as you'll recall, Paul encountered the risen Christ as he was on his way to persecute believers. And it's interesting how Paul describes that event in his letters to the churches of Galatia. In Galatians chapter one, verses 13-17, Paul writes:

13 You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. 14 I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. 15 But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased 16 to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.

5:14 When he says, “God was pleased to reveal His Son to me”, the word “reveal” is *apokalúptō* (ἀποκαλύπτω). Which as you know from our short study on Revelation, this word is the verb form of *apokálupsis* (ἀποκάλυψις), which is where we get our words apocalypse and apocalyptic from. Paul's experience on the Damascus Road, was for him, the “Big Reveal”. It altered the course of his life, it was a revelation. It changed his hermeneutic. That is to say, the way in which he interpreted scripture, was now, from this point on, reconfigured around his belief that Jesus was in fact the Messiah of Israel. I think this is important with respect to Romans chapter one, where Paul said he was, “called to be an apostle”. Strictly speaking, we shouldn't say that Paul converted from Judaism to Christianity. I think Paul thought of himself as a Jew until the day he died. In Paul's mind, by accepting Jesus as Messiah, he would not of thought he was abandoning his Jewish heritage. Far from that. I mean, that's not the case at all. Jesus was to him, the Jewish Messiah, after all. That's why Paul calls Jesus the “Christos”, or the Christ, which means “anointed one”, “the messiah”. Jesus as messiah was the one the Jewish stories and the Jewish scriptures anticipated. It doesn't make sense then, to say that Paul converted from Judaism. Instead we might say that Paul believed Jesus fulfilled and culminated all the promises given to Israel. The truth of this was revealed to Paul and as a result, he was called to be an emissary of the story of Jesus. In other words, he was called to be an apostle. He was sent out to share that Jesus was, in fact, the Messiah of Israel.

7:07 This is where Paul uses the word “gospel”. He says that he was “set apart for the gospel of God”. What does that word “gospel” mean? It's an important word for Paul and it's an important word for the church

today. In fact, it's a word that church uses quite often. In many Protestant circles, particularly in conservative, evangelical circles, the word gospel is typically used in the context of telling others how to go to heaven when they die. The gospel, many people say, is the good news that when you die, you can go to heaven through faith in Jesus Christ. Does this capture the essence of the gospel? Is this what the first century Christians would have thought when they heard the word "gospel"? I don't think so. So, let's explore this question a bit further. The Greek word behind our English word gospel is *euaggélion* (εὐαγγέλιον). It literally means good news, or good message. The first part of *euaggélion*, the eu part, means good. Like the word eulogy which means a good word about a person, usually given at their funeral. The second part of *euaggélion*, the aggélion part, probably sounds familiar, doesn't it? It's the Greek word for messenger. We often transliterate into English with the word, "angel". So, put it all together and you get *euaggélion*, or simply "good message, or "good news". We speak often about the good news of Jesus Christ; the gospel of Jesus Christ. We probably hear this word often around Christmas time when we read about the birth of Jesus. Take Luke's gospel, for example. Listen to the words of chapter two verses 8-11

**8** In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. **9** Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. **10** But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: **11** to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

The words here for "I'm bringing you good news", comes from the Greek word, euangelizō, which is the verb form of euaggélion. Now, we will come back to Luke's passage in a moment, but for now I want you to notice something very important. Nowhere in this context does the angel use the word gospel to talk about someone going to heaven when they die. Quite the contrary. It's not even using the word gospel to talk about justification by faith. None of this is the point of the angel's announcement. That's not the context of how or why they are proclaiming the gospel. Why is that? Is it because the New Testament does not teach justification by faith? No, not at all. The New Testament does teach justification by faith. Is it because God's people don't go to heaven when they die? No, it's not that either... Okay, so why am I raising these questions? The reason is, because I want to point out that contrary to popular conception, the "gospel" is not merely a synonym for how to get to heaven when you die, or for justification by faith. None of this would make sense in light of how the angels use the word gospel to announce the birth of the messiah. For those who take "gospel" as synonymous for say Doctrine of the justification by faith, they might be taken aback perhaps by how Luke reports the visitation. This passage, in other words, doesn't sit at home, not consistently at least, with how many of us were taught to think about the word "gospel". But we have to remember something very important. Luke was writing to an ancient people, living in an ancient context. And to these people living in the Roman Empire, it would've made perfect sense for the angels to say that the birth of the king, is gospel. In fact it might come as a big surprise, but Jesus wasn't the first king in the ancient world to have His birth announced as gospel. To see what I mean, let's do some historical research.

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12:30 The early Christians didn't invent the word gospel. They also obviously didn't invent the words "savior" or "God". Each of these terms were in full use in that era. They were part of the regular day in, day out vocabulary of the first century. I think this becomes evident when you look at ancient texts and inscriptions from the time period of the early Christian movement. For example, let's look at an ancient inscription from around the year 9 BC. It's often called the Priene Inscription from scholars or the Prienean Inscription. Steven J Friesen mentions this inscription in his book "Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins", (which, by the way, I highly recommend that you go and get a copy). At any rate, this old inscription describes how the province of Asia, (again here think here of

modern day Turkey), said they would publicly award the person who submitted the best proposal for venerating Augustus. The winner of the contest was a person named Paulus Favius Maximus. His basic idea was to take the official, provincial, political calendar and center it around Augustus's birthday, making it the start of the new year. And in this way he argued the emperor would be most honored. So, enthralled by this idea, the provincial leaders published a decree in this regard. And I'm going to read from an important section of this inscription. The translation of which is taken from Friesen's book, along with the Greek words grafted in, which is taken from Dittenberger's *Orientalis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae*. Notice very carefully the terms that were used to describe Caesar. Okay, I'm going to read it:

"Whereas the providence that ordains our whole life has established with zeal and distinction that which is most perfect in our life, by bringing Augustus. Whom she filled with virtue as a benefaction to all humanity. Sending to us and to those after us, a savior (soter), who put an end to war and brought and brought order to all things. The birth of the god (theos), who was the beginning of good tidings to the world through him."

Did you catch all that? Augustus is "a benefaction" to all humanity. He is described as a "savior", since he has put an end to war. Caesar has thus brought peace and order to the world according to this inscription. And interestingly he is also called a god (theos), whose birth is described as "the beginning of good tidings to the world". The word there good tidings is a different spelling, but it's the same idea – euaggélion. Quite literally his birth is called "gospel".

15:27 Now, let's turn our attention back to Luke, for comparison's sake. I'm going to read from that entire section from Luke, chapter two verses 1-14 from the New Revised Standard Version.

**2** In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. **2** This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. **3** All went to their own towns to be registered. **4** Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. **5** He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. **6** While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. **7** And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. **8** In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. **9** Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. **10** But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: **11** to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. **12** This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." **13** And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, **14** "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

17:01 So let's make some observations. First, notice how Augustus is depicted in both passages. In the inscription from 9 BC, he is labeled a divine being. He is described as a god. So, he is also called a savior, and he is hailed as a source of the world's peace. But in Luke's account, Caesar has been demoted. He is just a small player in the grand scheme of things. And one gets the impression that for Luke, Caesar is almost just a small piece on the chess board, who is used merely as a means to get the holy family to Bethlehem so that the real king could be born in the City of David. And once Caesar has done his part, he quickly fades into the insignificant footnotes of history. Okay, that's interesting. Second, notice the political context in which the word gospel is used. At the end of the day, the word gospel is used as a term for political propaganda in the inscription of 9 BC. In other words, there's a devious agenda

given to the word. But, in Luke's account, the angels have taken it over. Instead of being used as propaganda for the empire, the angels employ it for the purposes of the kingdom of God. So third, notice the striking parallels. The word gospel is used to describe birthdays. The reason is because these births according to each respective writer mark the beginning of a new era. The birth of Augustus was for the Roman Empire, a decisive turn toward peace and prosperity. Augustus stabilized the Roman world with his political knowhow and his strong military might. For the early Christian, Jesus's birth marked the true turn of an era. Jesus's birth brought true peace to the world. And you might be tempted to think that the inscription about Caesar is political, while Luke's text is not political. But nothing could be further from the truth. Luke's text is political, too. What Luke is really doing is offering a new sort of politics. A politics not marked by the ways of Caesar, but by the ways of Christ. And it's in this sense that the early Christian movement was a political movement. But here's the deal. It's a different sort of politics. It advocates for a new city, a new polis, which looked very different than Rome. The Christian faith does not advance by means of the sword, or by means of worldly power. Instead the Christian faith advances by means of foot washing. It advances by means of love, and sacrifice, and truth. That's the Jesus way. And in this sense, the gospel of Jesus Christ offers a new way to be human. It offers a competing politics to the politics of the world. The gospel of Jesus would have been a necessary balm for a world such as the first century. And perhaps, it could also be so for us in the twenty-first century.

20:16 Okay, so what does this have to do with Paul's letter to the Romans? Everything. Paul says he was "set apart for the gospel of God". For years growing up, I thought gospel meant the plan for how my soul was saved for life in heaven. In fact, my eyes would just glide over the word every time I would read it in the New Testament. For me, like perhaps for so many Christians, the word was all too familiar. And that's why learning the back ground text is so important. In fact, I can't emphasize this enough. The historical context, the background of the early Christians, is paramount for understanding the writings of the early Christians. And when you dive into this data, the New Testament text will gain some dimension. It'll gain some depth. And so we have to ask, when Paul used the word gospel, how would his readers understood it? How would his culture have understood it? What meanings would they have given it? For starters, I think a case could be made, given the data that we have, given the data that we've seen... I think a case could be made that many of Paul's readers would've understood the cultural and political connotations that that word evoked. For Paul, I think gospel is a word to describe how the world changed when Jesus showed up. In a world of pagan kings and abusive sovereigns; and in a time when hopelessness could be found everywhere, Paul would cleave to the good news that the world's true king had finally arrived. And when Paul saw this King on the road to Damascus, he saw the King enthroned. And for Paul, all the hopes and expectations that were embedded within him as a Jew, they were all fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah. He was thus called to be an emissary, an ambassador, an apostle; of the King, of the gospel. He was called to announce to the world that, yes, the King has come. And that is good news indeed!

22:16 There's so much more we could say about gospel, especially in light of the Old Testament context. And we'll get to that in the next episode, but let me offer a few thoughts presently. Like I mentioned earlier, people use the word gospel as synonymous as a road map on how to go to heaven when you die. But in ancient usage, as we saw in the inscription about Augustus, the word gospel is not a term that evokes ideas about otherworldliness. It is a very this-worldly term. What I mean by that is how gospel, for ancient people, was a word that had to do with the here and the now. It was about life today, and how the world today has changed for eternity, forever. That's how early Christians saw things too, only they saw Jesus and not Caesar as the beginning of all good things. It wasn't about going to heaven when you die, it was about heaven invading earth. To be sure the New Testament does teach that when Christians dies they are with Jesus in a sweet, heavenly bliss. But that is only the intermediate state. A temporary abode. The ultimate home for all of God's people is a renewed earth that has been infused with the life of heaven. And even now, with the first coming of Jesus, earth has already begun to change, even if that change has not yet been consummated. We live in an "already, not yet" reality. The kingdom has come, and it is coming soon. And I'm not at all suggesting that gospel has nothing to do with justification by faith. I'm just saying that you can't reduce the gospel down to that. At least not conceptually. The gospel of Jesus

Christ is the announcement that Jesus is King. That a new day has dawned for the inhabitants of the world. And to be sure justification is an important facet of all the many things that the gospel brings about, but the gospel is all encompassing. The gospel is the announcement that humanity is being restarted in the new human, namely in Jesus the Messiah. And this means that the earth is already being changed, and has yet to be changed. New creation is coming, and it already has come. No – the earth has not been recreated yet. I get that. But with every heart that turns to Christ, there you will find new creation. Make no mistake about it, every Christian is called to grant the world a preview of the new life that is to come. The gospel, then, is about resurrection, new creation. It's about how the King's kingdom has and will come to the earth. It is unfortunate how in popular usage the term gospel has become nothing more than a ticket to heaven, a bus ride away from the earth. And truly, I think this severs the gospel from all of its beauty. After all, this idea gives the impression that God's ultimate plan was to give people eternal life in a disembodied heaven. But nothing could be further from the truth. So let me say it again. God's ultimate plan is to give people an embodied eternal life on a newly created earth that has been infused with the glory of heaven. That's why the physical resurrection of Jesus was important. That's why we celebrate Easter. Now what all of this means is that gospel is not just about forgiveness of sins, but also about new life and new creation. Because the King has come, all things are new. And of course, because the gospel has been announced and because the true King has come, everyone is summoned to allegiance and to loyalty. This is where faith and faithfulness comes into play. So think once again how the word gospel was used to describe Caesar. Specifically his birth. It was an announcement that with his birth, a new world had dawned, and as a result, the grateful citizens should reorganize their time, their calendar, and their lives, around the emperor. And that same concept is in play when it comes to understanding the gospel of Jesus the Messiah. His coming into the world is good news because the world has now experienced a decisive change with His arrival. And as a result of all this, people should recognize that their lives have to change. They should reorganize their lives around the King. And the only response is faithfulness and loyalty. In fact, the sign and symbol of participation in this new era is a confession of faith in the Messiah made visible in the baptismal rite. And this shows who the citizens of the kingdom are, much like the circumcision did in the old covenant. Thus, justification by faith is in many ways a signal, a sign as to who is part of the new crucified and risen humanity. Now that we know the true King has come, for Paul the only question is this: What are we going to do in response?

27:18 That's the end of today's episode. And thanks again for listening to The Bible Unmuted. If you like this podcast, consider rating it on your podcast platform, subscribing to it, and sharing with your friends. You can also support the podcast by becoming a patreon member. Go to: <https://www.patreon.com/TheBibleUnmuted> - or simply find the link in the description of this episode. Thanks for listening. Until next time, friends.