

The Bible in One Year Week 28: Unashamed (Romans Pt. 1)

(Romans 1:1-17)

- **The Valley of Grace**

- One of my favorite apps is *Lectio365*, it helps you pray through Scripture every morning and night. They just shared this story: “On July 9th in 1737, 26-year-old Moravian missionary George Schmidt arrived on the shores of Cape Town, South Africa. George moved to Baviaanskloof, or ‘The Valley of Baboons,’ and setup the first Protestant mission station in Southern Africa. He built himself a home and planted a pear tree in his new garden. George befriended and educated a small group of displaced Khoi people, and taught them to farm so they wouldn’t go hungry. After five years of educating the community and sharing his faith, George baptized the first new follower of Jesus. News of the baptism upset some in the State Church. The scrutiny Schmidt came under, and the opposition to his mission that followed, led to his departure from South Africa in 1744, just 6 years after his arrival...what would become of those few Khoi Christians that he left behind? 50 years later, after Schmidt had died, a new generation of Moravian missionaries returned to South Africa to find out...‘On arriving back at Baviaanskloof in 1792, the three missionaries soon located the ruin of Schmidt’s original house. In the garden, to their amazement, stood a giant pear tree—the results of the tiny shoot that Schmidt had planted. Even greater surprises were in store. They soon made the acquaintance of an old woman named Magdalena. On finding out who they were, she introduced herself as one of the original believers who had been baptized 50 years previously. The light of faith still burned in her heart, and for half a century this remarkable woman had nurtured and led the indigenous church which Schmidt had founded. She drew out a small leather bag and asked if her daughter could read something from the New Testament. They listened astonished as this second-generation native believer read to them from a Bible given by Schmidt five decades earlier...The next generation of Moravian missionaries continued George Schmidt’s work developing a self-sufficient, literate agricultural community with a strong spiritual life. Within a decade, the governor of the region was so impressed with the impact of Baviaanskloof, ‘The Valley of Baboons,’ that he renamed it ‘Genadendal,’ which means ‘The Valley of Grace.’ ‘In 1995, in recognition of its remarkable history, Nelson Mandela changed the name of the official residence of the President of South Africa from ‘West Brook’ to ‘Genadendal.’...George Schmidt did not have to be present for the sapling he’d planted to grow into a pear tree. Nor did he need to be in South Africa for the Gospel seed he’d sowed to grow into a thriving church. God had been present, sustaining and growing the first shoots of life.” (*Lectio365*, “George Schmidt, Hero of Mission,” Friday, July 9th, 2021).
- What happened in George Schmidt’s ministry is similar to what happened (at a larger scale) with Paul and his letter to the Romans. He wrote to these believers he hadn’t even met yet. When he finally arrived in Rome later, he had to live in house arrest. And eventually when he was martyred, what would become of these Christians in Rome and all the churches he had planted? Well, 2,000 years later, we’re still here reading these words from God through his emissary, Paul. The seeds he planted took root, sprouted, and multiplied 30, 60, and 100-fold. Because the power wasn’t *in* Paul. The power was *in the Gospel* he proclaimed.
- “For 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. For 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,’” (1:16-17). That’s the key passage, the “thesis statement” which sets the stage for the whole letter of Romans that we’re looking at for the next two weeks.

- **The Church in Rome**

- The letter to the Romans is Paul’s *masterpiece*. It’s arguably one of the most powerful and influential writings of Christian history, and therefore, in Western culture: it’s impacted key figures like Augustine, Martin Luther, John Wesley. All through an unlikely convert named Paul.
- We think the church in Rome was actually founded by Peter after he fled from the persecution in Jerusalem. By the time Paul wrote to these Christians, their church was likely a *deeply divided*

community: about a decade before, there was trouble among the Jews in Rome. The Emperor Claudius got fed up and expelled *all* Jews from the city. Several years later when he died and Nero took over, the Jews were allowed back in. Imagine what happened with that church: the Jewish Christians completely left the city, leaving behind the gentile believers to continue on. Now, the Jewish Christians came back, and you have a recipe for a lot of division and confusion. This is one of the main reasons it seems Paul wrote Romans.

- In Romans, Paul explains the depths of the Gospel: how it fulfills God's promise to Israel and opens the door for the entire world to join God's new covenant family; how it transforms the way we understand our lives and our world; and how it unites one of the deepest cultural divisions in history, Jews and non-Jews. Paul "unpacked" the meaning of the Gospel for them because he wanted to strengthen their faith and show them how this Gospel was the basis for their unity.
- **The Gospel**
 - So, let's think about this in the context of that ancient world. Remember that Christianity began as a small, marginalized Jewish sect in a corner of the Roman Empire. Against all odds, it spread throughout the Empire amongst Jews and Gentiles. Without any political power or force, this small group would go from being on the fringes of society to essentially overtaking the Roman Empire and long outliving the Greco-Roman world. This would have been impossible to imagine then, but who has had more influence, Julius Caesar, or Jesus Christ? It's amazing.
 - The whole letter opens, "Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle," that is, an emissary or ambassador, "and set apart for the gospel of God..." He goes on to say that he is *eager* to come and see them and preach this Gospel in Rome, and he's not ashamed of it.
 - What's up with this word, *gospel*? It's a religious word we take for granted that we understand, but when someone asks us to explain, it can be difficult. The biblical Greek word is *euangelion*, and it wasn't originally a religious word at all. It was an official proclamation, "glad tidings" coming to a people from their leader.
 - When Caesar emerged victorious from some far off battle to defend or expand the empire, the messengers would go out ahead of him with the good news—the *euangelion*; when an official heir to the throne had been born, it was *euangelion*. It was a public declaration of some new development that *supposedly* meant something good for everyone.
 - The *euangelion* of Christ, according to Romans 1:2 is, "*the gospel [God] promised beforehand through the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead...*" The Gospel is a *proclamation*. It's the announcement that *something has happened which affects the whole world and demands a response—God's Son and Messiah who died and rose and is coming again, has a claim upon the entire world*. Are you seeing why this was controversial, why there were sometimes riots where Paul preached?
 - There is *so much* to get into, but we'll have to focus on the big picture. Like we said before, Romans is Paul's best attempt at explaining the fullness of the Gospel. So the church in Rome can be encouraged and be unified among the Jews and Gentiles. We can think of this Gospel in four ways: it's the good news of a *New King*, it's the good news of a *New Community*, it's the good news of a *New Life*, and it's all a *Gift of Faith*.
 - *The Gospel of a New King*: Did you know that this title "Son of God" was actually how they referred to Caesar? He was a son of the gods, sent to bring peace to the earth, a royal divine representative. This was common in other cultures too, the Egyptians did the same thing with Pharaoh. So, when the Bible talks about Jesus as the Son of God, it's not just describing his nature as the second Person of the Trinity, it's also talking about his *role* in the earth, in contrast to all the other supposed "Sons of God." Think of the kind of king all these other Rulers were compared with the kind of King Jesus is. A healer, a teacher, a servant, a righteous judge; he humbled himself to the point of death for the sake of all and was raised to life so he could be the *true savior* of all. We live for the *true King* and we live in an *alternative Kingdom*, an eternal Kingdom—a Kingdom of "righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit," (Romans 14:17). Think of *all* the implications for life in and ancient world and now.

- *The Gospel of a New Community*: Jesus has opened up the covenant promises God gave to Abraham and Israel to *the whole world*. Everyone, regardless of race or status or background. In this community everyone is equal, Jew and Gentile, Slave and Free, Male and Female. That's why Paul wanted them to be unified among the Jews and Gentiles. He wrote: "*Accept one another, then just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God,*" (15:7). Again, think of all the implications. We live in this community and we accept one another as Christ accepts us.
- *The Gospel of a New Life*: this Gospel of the resurrected King brings people into a whole *New Life*. It's a life that's no longer dominated by sin and no longer captive to death—but is reborn to live by *God's Spirit*. Paul says in Romans 8 that this new life in Christ opens up to affect not just humans but *all creation*. We no longer live for ourselves or by ourselves, but we live *by God's Spirit*. "*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God,*" (8:18).
- *A Gift of Faith*: All of this sounds pretty amazing, but the best part is it's all a gift. The Good News is, the Son of God came to earth to *make things right* by footing the bill for the devastating cost of all our sin with his own life. He offers us his own righteousness as a free gift that's accessed through faith: when we become united with him by faith, everything that's true of him becomes true of us. All we have to do is *trust* in God's faithfulness, believe that Jesus is Lord and he rose from the dead, and we become children of God. By faith, we become the grateful subjects of the true King, we become a part of his new community, we receive his new life.
- This is the Gospel, the euangelion that turned the Roman Empire and the world upside-down. It's not a passive invitation, it's a bold declaration that demands a response. It's not a halfway commitment, it's a claim upon our *entire lives*. It's not earned by trying to measure up, it's a free gift of faith. It's not for a select few, it's for everyone: Jews and Greeks, Moravian missionaries and Khoi people in South Africa, the whole world. This is why the Gospel is the power of God that brings salvation to all who believe, and we have *no reason* to be ashamed!
- Do you believe? Do you want to believe? Let's pray.