

Theme: The Good News

“Grace and be to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.” Amen.

Sermon Text: Romans 1:1-7

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God— the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him and for his name’s sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

According to a study on the news media, 61% of news coverage is bad news, while 39% is good news. This is not surprising. Bad news is more captivating than good news. Media outlets actually prefer bad news, because bad news means a higher viewership. Higher viewership means higher ratings. Higher ratings mean higher advertising revenue. There is a well-known saying in the news business: “If it bleeds, it leads,” that is, it becomes the lead story.

But there is another reason for a higher percentage of bad news today; namely, more bad things are happening. Headlines are increasingly alarming: wars, terrorism, natural disasters, epidemics, racism, crime, corruption, economic distress, carnage, death. There are nuclear missiles in North Korea, with the capability of striking the west coast of the United States.

Our world is perishable and the perishability is evident everywhere. Metal rusts. Food spoils. Relationships deteriorate. People age. Life ends. The natural order of things is decay. And decay is the ideal setting for bad news.

Paul wrote of this decay in Romans 8, saying, **“For the creation was subjected to FRUSTRATION”—the Greek word means futility or emptiness—“not by its own choice but by the will of the One who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its BONDAGE TO DECAY and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.”**

“But wait,” someone might argue. “What of all our technological advancements: computers, internet, microchips and microwave ovens, laser surgery and space shuttles. Surely these are signs of human improvement.” Yes, we should be grateful for technological advancements that improve our lives. But when the technology fails or the electrical power goes out, we are still nothing more than frightened human beings, stumbling about in the darkness and banging our shins on unseen furniture.

For a moment, forget the bad news in newspapers, online, on TV and radio. What of the bad news in your personal life? How many unhappy memories and unfortunate events began with someone telling you, “I’m afraid I have bad news”? Was it a doctor with bad news about a medical test? Was it a financial advisor with bad news about a stock portfolio or retirement fund? Was it a spouse with bad news about a divorce? Was it an employer with bad news about a job loss? I can remember a former employer using these very words when he called me into his office one week before Christmas and said, “I’m sorry, Mark. I’m afraid I have bad news. The company is reorganizing, and your position is being eliminated.”

Why is our world filled with such bad news? Why is the natural order of things frustration and decay? According to Scripture, the reason is sin. The Bible traces the cause of all human misery, sorrow, suffering,

and death to the fall of Man into sin. Paul made no apologies when he told the Romans, **“Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned.”**

Just as the Bible is clear about the ultimate cause of bad news in our world, it is equally clear that all people are sinful by nature. You know the Scripture passages as well as I do. Psalm 51:3, **“Surely, I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”** Romans 3:23, **“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”** Ephesians 2:3, **“All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.”** Whose wrath? God’s wrath. And there is no worse news than that.

Amid such bad news, we have the word “gospel” which literally means “good news.” The good news from God. Jesus Himself used this term in His teaching. On the day Jesus announced the beginning of His public ministry, while visiting the synagogue in His hometown of Nazareth, He took a scroll, turned to Isaiah 61, and read: **“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach GOOD NEWS to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”**(Luke 4:18-19)

After reading these words, Jesus returned the scroll, sat down (as was the custom of the teachers in Israel) and said, **“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”** And what were the characteristics of this good news? **“Freedom for prisoners,”** that is, those held in slavery by sin. **“Recovery of sight for the blind,”** that is, eyes opened to see true life, hope, and salvation in Christ. **“Release for the oppressed,”** that is, release from the unbearable weight of guilt. **“The Lord’s favor,”** that is, God’s undeserved love and grace. Would we not call such blessings good news?

The apostle Paul used the word “gospel” or “good news” more than any other New Testament writer. And in Romans 1:1-7, he explains why the gospel of Jesus Christ is truly good news.

First, the gospel is good news because it came from God. The apostle wrote, **“Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God.”** (Romans 1:1) Paul wrote to the Galatians, **“I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached to you is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.”** (Galatians 1:11-12) As a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, Paul never preached a “gospel about Paul.” He never offered a manmade gospel. He never based his message on human wisdom or human works. Instead, the gospel he preached came directly from God.

This is good news! Because God is always truthful and utterly reliable, it means that the good news about salvation through Jesus Christ is always truthful and utterly reliable. Have you ever asked, “How do I know God loves me? How do I know I’m saved by believing in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior? How do I know that Jesus paid for all of my sins? How do I know that God cares about me?” You know these things with absolute certainty because the gospel declares them, and the gospel is from the faithful, infallible God.

I recently visited with an elderly widow, whose husband recently died after sixty-seven years of marriage. “I’m not doing very well,” she confided. “I miss him.” I asked her, “Did your husband believe in Jesus Christ as his Savior?” “Oh, yes,” she answered. “Just as I do.” I told her, “I know how hard this separation is on you after so many years of marriage. But remember, it’s a temporary separation. You, your husband, and all believers will be reunited when the Lord Jesus returns in glory.” She looked at me tearfully and said, “I wish I could be certain of that.” I said, “You can be certain.” “How?” she asked. I pointed to my Bible and said, “Because it says so right here.”

Think about that. The good news of Jesus Christ is not some fabricated fairytale nor some contrivance of man. The gospel is not some worthless locker-room pep-talk meant to cope with all the bad news of life. The good news is from God. And because it is from God, it contains the very power of God.

This is why Paul was never ashamed to preach the gospel to kings and commoners, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, young and old, rich and poor. Paul stated this in Romans 1:16, **“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.”** And if this is true (and it is), should we, then, be ashamed to preach the gospel? Should we be ashamed to hear it? Should we be ashamed to apply it to even the most difficult circumstances of our lives—when we feel overwhelmed; when we are struggling with relationships; when we want to comfort the grieving or to reach those who’ve grown angry with God in the belief that God does not care for them, or worse, that God is out to hurt them? Never. We should never be ashamed of the gospel, of God’s good news.

Rather, when we doubt the power of the gospel to effect change in our lives, we need only remember what that very same gospel did for Paul himself—changing him from Saul the persecutor to Paul the apostle, from one of the Christian church’s most ardent enemies to one of its greatest teachers. **“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners,”** Paul told Timothy, **“of whom I am the worst.”** (1 Timothy 1:15) Perhaps this humble awareness is what led Paul to use the word “gospel” or “good news” more than any other New Testament writer. The good news about Jesus forever changed his life and his eternity.

Frankly, I used to think that all my years of Christian education, including the three years I spent in the seminary, were only meant to prepare me for the public ministry. I later realized that those years of studying the Bible and staying close to the “good news” were also meant to prepare me for the bad news I would receive in life. Aren’t each of us here today for the same reason—not to be seen nor for the sake of habit or ritual, but to be empowered, comforted, and uplifted by the gospel amid this bad-news world?

Second, the gospel is good news because it is about the Person and Work of Jesus Christ. Paul wrote in Romans 1:2, **“the gospel he had promised beforehand through the prophets in the Holy Scriptures, regarding his Son.”**

You won’t find the word “gospel” in the Old Testament, however, you will repeatedly find the “good news” of the coming Messiah and His redemptive work. The gospel is found from the first promise of the Savior in Eden, **“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; He will crush your head, and you will strike His heel,”** (Genesis 3:15), to the final Old Testament prophecy of Christ in Malachi 3:1, **“‘See, I will send My messenger, who will prepare the way before Me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to His temple; the Messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,’ says the LORD Almighty.”**

The Bible is not a ramshackle collection of stories, with no theme or purpose. To the contrary, the Bible is a cohesive whole. The Old Testament prophecies of the coming Savior, and the New Testament records the fulfillment of these prophecies in the Christ who came. Indeed, the Gospel of Mark opens with these striking words: **“The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”** (Mark 1:1)

This good news, as Paul explained, **“God promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures.”** That Jesus Christ is the focus of both the Old Testament and the New not only illustrates the cohesiveness of the Bible, it also tells us something vitally important about God. God is a God who keeps all His promises: the promise to send a Savior, the promise to deliver us from problems, the promise to never forsake us, the promise to bring us safely from this life to the next. That Almighty God faithfully keeps His promises is certainly good news for a bad-news world.

It is difficult to imagine a more concise summary of God’s good news than that found in Romans 1:3-4. **“...regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by the resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.”** Paul provided a similar summary of the gospel in 2 Timothy 2:8, **“Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.”** Paul is here teaching the true humanity and true deity of Jesus Christ, of which we will sing so

simply in the words of our final hymn today, “Beautiful Savior, King of creation, Son of God and Son of Man.”

In these few sentences, Paul is also teaching the good news of a completed salvation. The same Jesus who suffered and died on the cross was raised again to life. In that glorious resurrection He was proving that He did everything necessary to save us. There is no more for us to do. He is exactly who He claimed to be: ‘the Son of God and the Savior of Mankind.’

This is the good news of the gospel. This good news is true because this good news is from God. Therefore we base our Christian faith on this good news and cling to it in our most desperate hours.

Yet, the Bible does not merely teach the gospel in facts and passages. In the truest sense, the good news came to us in real flesh and blood in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, as we’re reminded in the Gospel of John, “**The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.**” (John 1:14) In other words, that baby who was born in Bethlehem, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and laid in a manger is none other than the Son of God. He is that twelve-year-old Boy teaching theologians in the temple of Jerusalem, that Man, who at the age of thirty, opened His ministry by declaring, “**The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor.**” (Luke 4:18) He is that Man who was tempted by the devil in the wilderness “**yet was without sin.**” (Hebrews 4:15) He is that Man who, as Isaiah wrote, carried our sicknesses, felt our sorrows, atoned for our sins, healed the sick, calmed storms, raised the dead, walked on water, fed thousands from meager provisions, and was rejected by the very people He came to save. That Man who stood before Pontius Pilate and said, “Yes, I am a King,” who was beaten, bloodied, spit upon, ridiculed, crowned with thorns, and finally nailed to a cross, but who rose triumphantly from the grave on the first Easter was and is none other than the Son of the living God.

The apostle Paul opened and closed every one of his letters with the same type of greeting. It is a greeting I used before reading today’s text and a greeting with which I’d like to close this message. It is a greeting made possible only through the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. To you, dear friends, who, like the Christians in Rome are “**loved by God and called to be saints,**” I offer this good-news greeting from none other than God Himself. Romans 1:7, “**Grace and be to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.**”

GRACE and PEACE to you from God. This is the gospel. This is the good news. Amen.

—Pastor Pastor Mark Weis