FOR THE SAKE OF HIS NAME

Romans 1:1–7

Key Verse: 1:5

“…through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations...”

Verses 1–7 are Paul’s opening greeting to the Christians in Rome. At that time a letter’s opening would be brief and simple, mentioning the author, the recipients, and a word of greeting. But this opening has seven verses, with highly unusual words and ideas that are dense with meaning. We wonder why Paul opens this letter writing like this. On the surface it’s because most of his audience has never met him. But more than that he really wants them to pay attention to what he’s about to say. These verses summarize Paul’s identity, his life’s work, and his purpose. It’s a lot to absorb. But it’s worthy of our study because, as a man in Christ, Paul, in a sense, is a model for all believers. At the beginning of a new year it’s good for all of us to be thinking about who we are in Christ, about the work he’s called us to, and about our life’s purpose. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living words today.

Look at verses 1–6. In Greek this is one very long, run-on sentence. But mainly Paul is introducing himself here, before he addresses the people he’s writing to in verse 7. He starts off in verse 1 with his identity, but in verse 2 he switches to the gospel, and in verses 3 and 4, to the person the gospel is about—Jesus, and then in verses 5 and 6 he comes back to describe the work he’s been doing. Though he has to introduce himself, it’s obvious that who he really wants to talk about is Jesus. Let’s think about why.

Read verse 1. At first this sounds like a rather straightforward sentence. But in Greek it’s quite unusual. The word “servant” is literally “slave.” Usually when we introduce ourselves to strangers, we like to put our best foot forward, saying something impressive about ourselves. But this was like telling people we don’t know, “Hi, I’m a slave of King Jesus.” Who does that? This word “slave” is severe, and in Paul’s day it was still a very real life experience for many people. Sometimes people use this word to complain, like when they say, “I’m tired of being a slave to this job” or “to these studies.” But when Paul says he’s a “slave” of Christ Jesus, he’s not complaining; he considers it the greatest honor he could ever have. In our “me” centered culture, it’s even more weird to be telling people that we’re a slave of anybody else. But Paul was happy to center his life around our King Jesus.

Where did this identity come from? It goes back to Paul’s conversion. As a young Pharisee named Saul he’d been ambitious for his own glory. He was trying to impress the Jewish leadership by working hard to get rid of the growing new sect of followers of Jesus, whom the leaders had had crucified. He was caught up in a public frenzy of persecuting Christians. But his conscience was bothering him after he witnessed the stoning of Stephen, who died forgiving those killing him. Then on the road to Damascus the Risen Christ met Saul and called him to be his servant. It turned his life around 180°. After being blind for three days his eyes were opened to see that he’d been living as an enemy of God. He came to know the grace of Jesus, who shed his blood to redeem him to be his own. He even changed his name from “Saul,” a great one, to “Paul,” a small one (Ac7:58–8:3; 9:1–19; 13:9; 26:16; cf. 1Ti1:13–16). God’s forgiveness of all his unforgivable sins set him free from pride, guilt and all his inner darkness. He found a new life purpose to live for Christ. From then on, everything he did would be done for his King Jesus. He was “all in,” “sold out,” totally committed, totally devoted. Later he wrote, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Php1:21). He was ready to go through any hardship, even to die for the name of the Lord Jesus (Ac21:13). Some people think, “Well, good for you, Paul. Go ahead. That’s a bit too intense for me.” But the Bible uses this same word “slave” to describe all Christians, regardless of our circumstances (1Co7:22; Rev1:1; 19:2b). We’re taught to be not people-pleasers but slaves of Christ, doing God’s will from our hearts (Eph6:6). We can have a heart to live like this only when we know his grace. His grace is what opens our eyes to see our true identity in Christ.

Read verse 1 again. Paul says he was “called to be an apostle.” It wasn’t just his special calling. The Bible says that for all of us, “calling” is important. Paul mentions in verses 6,7 that the people he’s writing to have also been “called” to belong to Jesus and “called” to be saints. All those who love God are “called according to his purpose” (8:28). Paul says all Christians are “predestined, called, justified and glorified” (8:30). He explains how God “called” Jacob instead of his twin brother Esau, even before they were born and had done anything good or bad; God wanted to show his own purpose in calling people, “not because of works” (9:11). Paul also says that the calling of God is “irrevocable” (11:29)—meaning it can’t be taken back or changed. He says elsewhere that God calls each of us to a certain life which he has assigned, and we shouldn’t try to change or get out of it, but live out our calling with God (1Co7:17–24). We all need a sense of what God’s calling is in our own lives.

Paul says that he was “called to be an apostle.” “Apostle” generally means “one who is sent.” But here it’s a special term meaning those who’d met the Risen Christ in person and were sent as his representatives, with his authority to teach. The apostles were an elite group in the church (1Co9:5; 12:28,29; 15:7; Gal1:17, 19; Eph2:20; 3:5; 4:11; 1Th2:6).Originally Paul wasn’t one of them. But after meeting the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus, he included himself as the last of them, only by the grace of God (1Co15:8–10). He said he was sent “not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father” (Gal1:1), the best credentials a person can have. After establishing churches all throughout the Roman Empire (15:19), Paul had become a controversial figure. His letters were hard to understand and easy to distort (2Pe3:15,16). People had been criticizing Paul not only because of his dramatic conversion but also because he was now so close to Gentiles. He seemed to be way out there on his own, unaccountable, and to be changing the Jewish religion into something quite different, maybe even unholy. To many, Paul didn’t seem legitimate. Wherever he went people were contradicting and arguing with him. But though he’s nothing but a slave of Christ, he insists here that he was also “called to be an apostle.” He indeed wrote with Christ’s authority. There’s one final meaning of Paul’s apostleship. He writes in 11:13 that he is “an apostle to the Gentiles” (cf. Gal2:7–9). Paul was God’s chosen instrument to carry the name of Jesus to the Gentiles (Ac9:15; 13:47). It was Paul’s very specific mission. Just as we all have a specific calling, we also have a specific mission in our lives as Christians. We need God’s help to find out what it is.

Read verse 1 once more. Paul says he was “set apart for the gospel of God.” Before any of his missionary journeys, the Holy Spirit told the Antioch church members: “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (Ac13:2). It happened in the midst of his ministry. But Paul writes in Galatians 1:15,16, “But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles…” Here it happened even before he was born. It means that being set apart for the gospel of God was God’s absolute will for Paul’s life. We can spend so much time not really sure what we’re doing with our lives. Even if we knew at one time, we need to be reminded and grow deeper into knowing God’s special purpose for our lives.

Paul was set apart “for the gospel of God,” stressing that it wasn’t his own idea. Then he goes on. Read verse 2. He’s emphasizing that the gospel he preaches is the fulfilment of the Scriptures (3:21; 1Co15:3,4; Gal3:8; cf. Lk24:44–46). Contrary to the people criticizing him, Paul is not making up “a different gospel” (2Co11:4; Gal1:6); he’s proclaiming the gospel God had promised all along, the gospel which God himself has fulfilled. In other words, the gospel Paul is out to explain in this letter is God’s idea.

And it’s not just an idea; it focuses on a person. Read verses 3,4. The gospel of God concerns his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. In these verses Paul contrasts “according to the flesh” and “according to the spirit.” Humanly speaking Jesus was “descended from David.” It was a great human descent. But it had a special meaning: Jesus was the King God had promised to send through David’s line (2Sa7:12,13). For Paul, spiritually speaking Jesus is so much more. He was “declared to be the Son of God in power…by his resurrection from the dead.” It was a special moment when God the Father declared to all creation that his Son has a unique power. It’s not just abstract theology. It’s the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (1:16). It’s a power that enables us, though we’re so weak and ungodly, to “walk in newness of life” (5:6; 6:4). This is the good news of the gospel of God. Paul concludes that the gospel he preaches is focused not on himself, but on “Jesus Christ our Lord” (4b). This is our universal confession of faith, a confession of faith that leads to our salvation (10:9).

Read verse 5. In a unique way Paul received “grace and apostleship” through Jesus. He was forgiven of persecuting the church and sent on a new life mission. But this grace and apostleship, in a sense, is also for all believers. Jesus paid for each of us to get out of our slavery to sin by shedding his blood on the cross; through that, God gives this same grace as a gift to anyone who believes in Jesus (3:24). When he reconciles us to himself through Jesus, God also gives us the ministry and the message of reconciliation to share with people who don’t know him, making us ambassadors for Christ (2Co5:18–20). If we’ve received this grace, we cannot *but* want to share this grace with others.

Paul says in verse 5b that his main work is “to bring about the obedience of faith.” He’s talking about helping people to learn obedience to God through his own words and deeds (15:18). He writes this again, at the very end of Romans: “…according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith…” (16:26) Specifically, “the obedience of faith” means to teach people to observe all that Jesus commanded (Mt28:20). We don’t believe for a while, then maybe add a little obedience here and there. Faith and obedience always go together, right from the start. If we don’t learn this obedience to our Lord Jesus, we’ll keep on obeying our sinful nature; but if we do, we commit ourselves to obey from our hearts his standard of teaching (6:16,17). The obedience of faith to our Lord Jesus comes from having genuine love for him (Jn14:15; Lk6:46).

What stands out in verse 5 is Paul’s phrase “for the sake of his name.” Paul wanted people from all the nations to accept the gospel and learn the obedience of faith for the sake of [Jesus’] name. As we saw in verse 1, as a slave of King Jesus, all that Paul was doing was not for his own glory, but for the sake of the Lord Jesus. Here he’s saying that this motive was at the heart of all his missionary work as well: “for the sake of his name.” As more and more people open their hearts to the gospel and let it change their lives, it brings more and more honor to the name of Jesus (Ac19:17). It might be a damaged, hopeless person whose life is healed and restored that brings honor to Jesus’ name. It might be a highly educated, high-ranking person who turns away from the empty way of life and begins living for Jesus. It might be a person coming from a part of the world that has still never really heard of Jesus before. In any case, the more people who receive Jesus as Lord and let his gospel change their lives, the more glory is brought to the name of Jesus. This was Paul’s greatest passion in life. He repeats throughout this letter to the Romans how the gospel reveals God’s glory (5:2; 6:4; 9:23; 11:36; 16:27).

This overarching principle, “for the sake of his name,” can really inspire us not only in ministry but in all that we do. Paul wrote famously in 1 Corinthians 10:31, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” So, honestly speaking, what are we living for? Is it just to survive? Is it to be comfortable? Is it to make a name for ourselves? May God inspire us through our study of Romans to live from our hearts for the sake of Jesus’ name.