

Launching question

Brainstorm five phrases to include as the most basic summary of the gospel.

God's gospel

READ Romans 1:1-7

Fill in a large version of this chart, asking about 'the gospel' ...

	What we're told	What this might mean
Where does it come from?		
When was it made up?		
Who/what is it about?		
What will it produce?		
Who is it for?		
Does it work?		

Spend time on the last column especially, thinking through the implications.

Compare chart with your brainstormed phrases at start: where do we differ?

Why do Christians need to study a book like *Romans* that tells us the gospel we presumably already believe?

Paul's gospel ministry

READ Romans 15:25-26

In pairs, decide: (a) what are Paul's travel plans?
(b) what is Paul's missionary strategy?

Look at 1:14. What is the 'obligation' that Paul feels? to whom? why?
How much of Paul is applicable to us? are we under similar 'obligation'?

READ Romans 1:8-17

What is Paul praying for? why is he so keen to visit Rome?

If Paul's priority is to reach the unreached, why is he 'eager to preach the gospel to you ... in Rome' (1:15)?

How are Christians strengthened and encouraged?

What picture emerges of Paul after all we've read tonight?

Thinking it through

Why is Paul's life so dedicated to proclaiming God's gospel?

What of these reasons are unique to Paul, and what is common to us?

Think again about his summary of the gospel: what is there in that gospel that drives him to proclaim it so passionately?

Whether or not we're a Billy Graham type (... and probably none of us are!), what would it mean for us to be as gospel-centred as Paul?

What can we learn from his example about how to be gospel-centred?

Summary

Paul's letter to the young church in Rome has long been understood as 'a compendium of Christian doctrine'. Certainly it is difficult to imagine a more comprehensive summary of 'the gospel of God'. But Paul writes this gospel into a specific context, appealing to both Jewish and Gentile Christians to accept one another just as God accepts both (which he does on the same basis, from the same plight, by the same means). These studies focus on 'the melodic line' of this gospel running through the letter.

The gospel logic

Paul writes *Romans* with a very tight logic:



It is vital to be clear what Paul defines as 'the problem' or we may struggle to see why 'the solution' solves it. Similarly, 'the response' depends on what Paul means by 'God's mercies' in 12:1 (cf 11:32). In this first study, Paul describes himself as a gospel man ... but what he means by the gospel is what all the letter is about. Beware assuming we know what Paul means!

Theme Sentence

Paul is a gospel man, his whole life dedicated to proclaiming God's gospel.

Ideas for application

Be careful how you apply the teaching about Paul's ministry. We are not called to be apostles, not can we infer from 1:14 that we are all under obligation to all types/nationalities of people: 'unless Scripture explicitly tells us we should do something, what is merely narrated or described can never function in a normative way' (Fee and Stuart: How to read the Bible for all its worth p 97). Our motive for gospel-centredness and evangelism must be based on what the gospel is, not on the fact that Paul evangelised.

- are we clear on what the gospel is? *Romans* will keep on summarising it, often differently from us (eg 1:3-5), and this will be good for us! Keep asking about every summary: is this how I would have put it?
- as we learn the gospel more, we should become more gospel-centred (and in this, Paul will be a shining example and encouragement to us).

Commentary

In this 'envelope', many themes recur at the start and end of letter (eg Paul's confidence in the Roman believers, his ministry to the Gentiles, his desire to visit Rome and the frequent hindrances to such a visit). But, it's also far more than just a 'to you, love from me'. The theme is set: it's about the gospel, and about that gospel dominating our priorities.

GOD'S GOSPEL

1:1-7

- **comes from God** (1). It is a great error to put ourselves at the heart of the gospel we preach. 1;1-5 turns that selfishness upside down. Since the source of the good news is not ourselves, or Paul, but God, it's not our place to alter it; rather, we must pass it on truly and unchanged. And since he is its subject, we mustn't suggest that it's about us or our need or 'a God-shaped hole' in people's lives.
- **is not new** (2), but was 'promised beforehand in the Holy Scriptures' (which is why Paul quotes the OT, and why we must read the Bible to know the gospel). Jesus isn't 'God's Plan B' nor is the OT about a God of anger and the NT about a God of love. He has always been the same God with the same plan. It is a key theme in *Romans* that God has done what he said he would.
- **is about Jesus** (3). Paul describes Jesus as The King promised in 2 Sam 7:8-16, qualified from two points of view. In earthly terms, he was a son of David (along with many others in that family tree!). In the spiritual realm, the Holy Spirit declared him to be the powerful Son of God by resurrecting him (since only a king who conquers death can reign for ever, as 2 Sam 7:13). We don't proclaim the gospel unless we ask where we stand in relation to this Jesus with absolute authority over all. No wonder Paul says it's all 'for the sake of his name' (5).
- **demands the obedience of faith** (5). The right response to the gospel is to obey its command to us to believe it. The right response of faith will show itself in a life of obedience. And probably both of these meanings of the phrase are implied here. We certainly cannot present the gospel in a 'take it or leave it' way: submission is the only appropriate way to respond to The King.
- **applies to everybody** (5). 'Gentiles' (NIV) really should be translated 'nations' (ESV) because Paul's point here is not to go to Gentiles-as-opposed-to-Jews, but to go to everybody (including those in Rome). The gospel is for every people group imaginable - Muslims, Hindus, atheists, the lost and lonely, the successful and happy, family, friends, us - do we think, speak, act, pray as if this were so?
- **is powerful** (16-17). God's power is unleashed in this gospel rather than in anything else. 'Power Evangelism' simply means 'preaching'.

PAUL'S GOSPEL MINISTRY

1:8-15

Paul hopes to visit Rome en route to Spain (15:24, 28); he has also long wanted to visit / preach in Rome too (1:8-15). But he has been frustrated several times before, and now is delayed by the need to take aid from Greece to the Christians in Jerusalem. This is a dangerous undertaking, for which he asks prayer (15:31); he may even have written the letter because he was unsure of reaching Rome to preach the gospel in person.

Paul is satisfied that the Romans know the gospel: he stresses their faith (1:8), obedience (16:19), goodness, knowledge and ability to teach it (15:14). The Roman church has an international reputation (1:8) and Paul is reiterating things they've already been taught rather than covering new ground (15:15). Yet he feels the need to write to them 'boldly' the longest of the surviving letters. Presumably then, we need to hear it all no less.

- **the gospel man is a pioneer.** At the start of the letter, Paul doesn't stress his apostolic authority (as, for example, at the start of Galatians), but his apostolic task: to preach the gospel (1, 5, 9, 16-17). His strategy is to reach the unreached (15:19b-21), and he quotes the Servant Song of Isaiah to show that this is Christ's strategy too: where God's name was 'continually ... despised' (Isaiah 52:5 = Rom 2:24), 'all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God' (Isaiah 52:10). For us to be centred on the gospel is to be no less 'under obligation' (1:14) seeking the salvation of everyone (1:16).
- **the gospel man boasts!** Paul glories, boasts, exults (15:17, same word in 2:17; 3:27; 4:2; 5:2, 3, 11) in his gospel work. The reason this isn't inappropriate is because it's not him who's done it, but Christ (15:17). It's always appropriate to boast of him and his gospel (1:16)
- **the gospel man prays** (1:8-13). Paul remembers the Romans before God frequently/regularly, thanking God for their faith, longing for their growth, and knowing that he may be the answer to his own prayer.
- **the gospel man knows that everyone needs the gospel.** If Paul is sure of the Romans' conversion, and if his priority is to reach the unreached, there's a puzzle: why does he want to preach the gospel to the Christians in Rome (1:15)? The answer is that this will 'strengthen' (1:11), 'encourage' (12), and produce 'a harvest' (13). We're easily tempted to think we can move on from the basic gospel. Our confusion stems, possibly, from the false distinction we tend to make between coming to faith and the process of growing to Christian maturity. Paul, though, has just one message, for unbeliever and believer alike, and it is God's gospel, about his Son: Christians need to hear the gospel too. The message of *Romans* therefore is for us.

Paul is often misrepresented as harsh/fanatical, and his teaching explained away as a product of his culture. But this passage belies that. To reject Paul's teaching is to reject the gospel that comes from God. And to reject Paul is to reject a man of passionate concern for people he's never even met.