

WHERE DO WE START?

A Bible Study on Paul's Epistle to the Romans

by Steve Walker

People often ask, "Where should I start studying the Bible?" After all, the Bible is a big book! If we are going to tackle it, we had better have a good game plan, or we will give up in frustration and lose. Some Bible teachers tell us to start in the Book of Genesis. Others say Matthew or the Gospel of John or the Psalms or even Leviticus.

As well intentioned as these starting points may be, none of them offers the best place to start our Bible study program. While the whole Bible is important, not every passage of Scripture is an equally good starting point. If we are going to learn about and appreciate God's plan, we need to start someplace that will tell us what God is doing today. God wants us to understand what He is doing today, and He wrote the Bible that this might be so.

I know this goes against the grain of what most of us have been taught since early childhood (especially by the religious institutions and seminary programs), but the Bible says we can *all* enjoy and understand what God is doing today! What's more, the Bible gives us *all* we need to participate in it intelligently as well!

So let's get going. The best place to embark on our Bible study voyage is in Paul's Epistle to the Romans, a book that will carry us through the stormy waters of this sinful world and bring us into God's safe harbor of life and righteousness. Of course, starting in Romans does not mean that we forget the rest of the Bible. In fact, our journey will only succeed if we keep one critical observation regarding the Bible in mind:

EVERYTHING WRITTEN IN THE OLD TESTAMENT, THE GOSPELS AND THE FIRST PART OF ACTS HAS TO DO WITH GOD BLESSING THE WHOLE WORLD (THE GENTILES) THROUGH THE *RISE* OF HIS NATION ISRAEL.

Some may find this statement shocking and others may think it is insignificant. Well, stick with me to the end of this short essay, and I think its importance will become overwhelmingly apparent and infinitely helpful in understanding what God is doing today.

Before turning to Romans, however, let's first take a moment to anchor this statement to the foundation of God's Word.

This Is What The Old Testament Spoke About

This is what God spoke about to Abraham. The very premise of the promise God made to Abraham referred to the nation He would create through him, which would be the source of blessing to the whole world.

"I will make you a great nation; I will bless you

and make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:1-3).

This is what God spoke about to the Israelites through Moses when explaining what He would accomplish through them:

“...if you diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God... the LORD your God will set you high above all nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you...The LORD will establish you as a holy people to Himself, just as He has sworn to you...then all peoples of the earth (*ie., the Gentiles*) shall see that you are called by the name of the LORD...The LORD will open to you His good treasure...to bless all the work of your hand...the LORD will make you the head and not the tail (*of the nations*)...(Deut. 28:1-13, italics mine).

This is what God spoke about to David when He promised him a King and a Kingdom:

...I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own...Also the LORD telleth thee that he will make thee an house...I will set up thy seed after thee...and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build an house for My Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever...My mercy shall not depart away from him... And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever (*over the whole world*) (II Sam. 7:10-17, italics mine)

This is what God spoke about to the Israelites through the prophets:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who proclaims peace...who proclaims salvation, who says to Zion (*Jerusalem and Mount*)) , “Your God reigns!” Your watchmen shall lift up *their* voices...For they shall see eye to eye when the LORD brings back Zion. Break forth into joy, sing together, you waste places of Jerusalem (*in Israel*)! For the LORD has comforted His people (*Israel*), He has redeemed Jerusalem. The LORD has made bare His holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; And all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God... (Is. 52:7-10, italics mine).

Statements like these abound on every page of Old Testament Scriptures. The Old Testament order of things goes like this: First, God would create His Own nation, the nation of Israel. Then He would bless Israel and raise her above all other nations of the world, setting up His Kingdom on earth through her. Then, after this, He would use Israel to take those blessings out to the whole world. That was God’s plan in the Old Testament, and that was what He spoke about since the world began--all the way from the prophets back to David and to Moses and all the way back to Abraham and beyond. This point bears repeating:

This Is What The Gospels Spoke About

The Old Testament always speaks of blessings going out to the Gentiles through the **RISE** of Israel, God’s very own nation.

Turning over the last page of the Old Testament, we enter into the Gospels--Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. What about them? Did God start something new there? Mainline denominations and professing "Christian" religions say, "Yes, He did." They tell us that God was all done with Israel and had started a new entity, the 'church', the Body of Christ. They say God replaced Israel with the Body of Christ. But is this what really happened? Or is this just Gentile arrogance talking? What do the Gospels themselves say?

This is what God told Mary through the angel when announcing the birth of Jesus Christ:

And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David (*in Israel*) . And He will reign over the house of Jacob (*Israel*) forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end (*ie., will cover the whole world*) ” (Lk. 1:31-33, italics mine).

This is what God told Zarcharias to proclaim:

Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people (*Israel*), and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David (*Israel*) , As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets, who *have been* since the world began (Lk. 1:68-70, italics mine).

God is not doing something new here; He is continuing something old--His plan for Israel as revealed in the Old Testament "by the holy prophets since the world began." Israel was to be redeemed, established as a Kingdom in Palestine, and then that kingdom would expand to include the whole world.

This is what the Lord Jesus told the 12 disciples regarding their ministry and work:

Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Mat. 10:5-6).

Everything in the Gospel accounts start with Israel and hinge on her response.

This is what Jesus told a Gentile woman when she came to Him for blessing before the Israel's fullness had arrived:

But He answered and said, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Then she (*a Gentile woman*) came and worshiped Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" But He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's (*children of Israel's*) bread and throw it to the little dogs (*the Gentiles*)." (Mat. 15:24, italics mine).

Here is the 'Gospel According to Jesus': First Israel would be saved and blessed, and then, and only then, would the Gentiles be saved and blessed. In this program, Gentiles are saved and blessed when they assume their place under Israel's table where they would be able to receive some of her super-abounding blessings as they fall to the ground. This was the order of things in the Gospels, and this was the order of things in the Old Testament. To ignore this divine plan or to trivialize it is to blind ourselves to the clear statements of God in His Word.

So then in summary: God did not start something new in the Gospels. He was continuing something old--the program He originated for the nation Israel, all the way back to Abraham and beyond—"since the world began." In this ancient plan God was working to raise up a nation of His own, Israel, and through her RISE bless all the Gentile nations of the world. Again, this bears repeating:

The four Gospels continue what God began in the Old Testament—He was fulfilling His earthly purpose to bless the whole world through the RISE of Israel, which had been spoken of by the prophets since the world began.

This Is What Early Acts Spoke About

What about the Book of Acts? Israel had rejected the ministry of their Messiah, the Lord Jesus, joining the Gentiles in crucifying Him. With this rejection in hand, had God started something new? Did God begin the Church, the Body of Christ, in the beginning of Acts, on the Day of Pentecost? Most evangelicals and fundamentalists say He did. But what does the Book of Acts itself say?

Luke wrote the Book of Acts as well as the Gospel of Luke, and he tells us that after the resurrection Jesus spoke to Peter and the 12 about what God was doing at that time:

“These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning me. And He opened their understanding that they might comprehend the Scriptures” (Lk. 24:44-45).

Everything Jesus taught the 12, both before and after His resurrection, had been those things “spoken of since the world began” by Moses and the prophets, all of which had to do with Israel and Gentiles receiving blessing through her *RISE*. Luke continues in the opening verses of Acts:

To whom (*Peter and the 12*) He presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of things pertaining to the Kingdom of God....they asked Him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:3-7, italics mine)

Everything here had to do with Israel and her Kingdom, and with it the blessings that would flow out to the whole world. Peter clarifies this plan in the sermon he preached:

“Men of Israel....the God of our fathers glorified His servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied...You killed the Prince of Life whom God raised from the dead...But those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets...Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins

may be blotted out, so that the times of refreshing (*for Israel*) may come from the presence of the Lord...the times of restitution of all things (*the whole world*), which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began.” (Acts 3:1-21, italics mine)

Statements like these can be found on every page of early Acts. The post-resurrection Lord Jesus and Peter and the rest of the 12 apostles were not involved in beginning something new. They were involved in bringing something old to its climax, thereby fulfilling all that God had spoken of since the world began. Again, this point bears repeating:

The four Gospels and Acts continue what God began in the Old Testament--fulfilling His earthly purpose to bless the Gentiles through the RISE of Israel, which had been spoken of since the world began by all His holy prophets.

The Million Dollar Question: What Does Paul Say God Is Doing?

Hopefully most of you are not throwing up your hands and pulling out your hair, pleading with me to stop: “I get it! I get it! God’s program in the Old Testament, Gospels, and Acts has to do with His plan to bless the world through Israel’s **RISE**. But what is your point? What does this have to do with Paul and Romans and what God is doing today?”

Thus far we have covered most of the Bible, and, as we have seen, it is always the same divine plan: God blessing the world through Israel’s rise. But what about Paul’s Epistles? Had God started something new there? Or was He continuing something old? Most Bible teachers say no, God did not start something new with Paul. They suggest that Paul is continuing God’s Old Testament plan, or that he is continuing the work of Peter and the 12. But what does God say about Paul’s ministry in the Letters themselves?

Well, for those who have stayed with me, we have now reached a critical juncture. Here our vessel will either hit the rocks and sink, or it will navigate around them and sail into the safe harbor of God’s plan for today. So let’s carefully review the three milestones we have seen thus far. God’s plan in the Old Testament, Gospels and early Acts can be summarized with these three points:

1. That plan had to do with the **RISE** of the nation Israel.
2. That plan had been spoken of since the world began.
3. That plan had to do with God’s glory on earth.

With this fresh in our minds, now let's listen to God's revolutionary description of Paul's ministry:

1. PAUL'S MINISTRY HAD TO DO WITH ISRAEL'S TEMPORARY *FALL*!

What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks...Just as it is written: "God has given them a spirit of stupor, Eyes that they should not see, And ears that they should not hear, To this very day." And David says: "Let their table become a snare and a trap, A stumbling block and a recompense to them"...But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles. (Rom. 11:7-11)

The plan God revealed through Paul's ministry has to do with a time when He would bless the Gentiles *in spite* of Israel's *FALL* not because of her permanent *RISE*.

2. PAUL'S MINISTRY HAD BEEN KEPT SECRET SINCE THE WORLD BEGAN!

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began but now made manifest... (Rom. 16:25)

For this reason I, Paul...if...you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you...by revelation He made known to me the mystery (*secret*)...which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men...(Eph. 3:4-5, italics mine.)

The plan God revealed through Paul ministry had not been spoken of since the world began, but had been kept secret since the world began.

3. PAUL'S MINISTRY HAD TO DO WITH GOD'S GLORY IN THE HEAVENLIES THROUGH THE CHURCH, THE BODY OF CHRIST!

...that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel...that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ...which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God...to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, according to His eternal purpose...(Eph. 3:1-11)

What God says about Paul's ministry in the Scriptures ought to smack us in the face like a two-by-four. That is what it did in the 1st century! Every God-ordained prophet before Paul for thousands of years had spoken about one plan of God whereby blessings would come to the world through Israel and her **RISE**. But no one before Paul had ever spoken about a divine plan whereby the world would be blessed apart from Israel and in spite of her **FALL**!

To accomplish the latter, God raised up a new and unique apostle, the Apostle Paul, gave him a new and unique message, the Gospel of Grace, and created a new and unique people, the Church, the Body of Christ. This is Paul's apostleship, his stewardship, his responsibility. He is not one of the 12. Nor is he the 13th. Nor is he one in a long line of prophets. He is that new and unique apostle.

Let's again carefully review the milestones we have seen regarding God's plan revealed through Paul's apostleship:

1. That plan has to do with the Church, the Body of Christ.
2. That plan was kept secret since the world began.
3. That plan has to do with the God's glory in the heavenlies.

Now, if words have any meaning at all, and if language has any ability to convey information, we must all readily agree that a plan that had been spoken of since the world began regarding what God would do through Israel's **RISE** cannot possibly be the same as a plan that had been kept secret since the world began regarding what God would do through Israel's temporary **FALL**. Nothing could be clearer than this.

Paul's ministry is distinct from that of the 12 in early Acts, from that of the Lord Jesus on earth as recorded in the Gospels, and from that of all the prophets in the Old Testament. This, dear friend, is the key to studying the Bible and understanding what God is doing today. When we grasp this basic Bible truth, we start on a path that leads us to see and to appreciate what God is really doing today.

If we neglect or reject it, however, the result will be confusion, defeat and despair. Without this truth we will have to do what most of 'Christianity' has done since the days of Paul--substitute wishful thinking for divine faith, the ways of man for the ways of God, and the works of the flesh for the work of the Spirit.

Next time we will put this basic distinction to work and see its earth-shattering significance.

For more information, visit our website at:

www.godinvitesyou.com

There you will find written and audio material for further Bible study.

A WEDDING GRACE

*FOR JOAN BRANER AND MAX ADAMSKI ON THEIR
WEDDING DAY*

For many the word ‘grace’ has fallen onto hard times. To those who do not view it merely as some old-fashioned word that is little used today, ‘grace’ calls forth a kind of foggy notion of natural providence, like the rain that falls on the parched field or the arrival of spring flowers after the barren winter or the warm sunshine that comes after a cold night. But this way of understanding ‘grace’ falls far short of what the Bible says.

Theologians think a lot about the word ‘grace’, and many have tried to distill its basic meaning with reference to God and the Bible. Some describe it simply as God’s *loving-kindness* to humanity. Others agree with this as far as it goes but insist on drawing attention to its nature of being an absolutely *free gift*. Still others want to go further, insisting that it is a gift given freely not only without regard for our *supposed merit* but (and more importantly) in spite of our *actual demerit*. If we pull all these thoughts together into one sentence, we will have a pretty good theological definition of grace. Grace is God’s loving-kindness given as a free gift not only apart from our own supposed merit but in spite of our actual demerit.

This is better, but it is still not good enough. The Bible says much more about ‘grace’, especially in the Letters of the Apostle Paul. Let’s look at some of the things the Bible says.

First of all, God’s good news for today is Grace. Paul’s letters always open and close by announcing the fact that God is now sending us His “grace and peace.” Paul opens the Letter to the Romans, for instance, by proclaiming: “**Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**” and closes it by praying that “**the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all**” (Rom. 1:3 and 16:24). This grace message is God’s good news for today. Paul calls it the Gospel of Grace.

Second, this Grace Gospel was procured by the Person and Work of the Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross of Calvary. Paul puts it this way:

For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood... (Rom. 3:22-25).

This grace is the result of Christ’s work on the Cross. On the one hand, His death provides the propitiation or satisfaction that completely meets all the demands of God’s infinite justness and holiness against sin and sinners. On the other hand, it provides the redemption needed to meet all of our need, removing us from the slave market of sin thereby freeing us to serve God. In accomplishing this, God has reconciled the world to Himself so that now, on the basis of grace, He is free to declare righteous and save, all who believe.

Paul says it best in Ephesians 2:8-9:

For by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: It is the gift of God: Not of works lest any man should boast.

In Paul's Epistles we learn that God's grace does everything. Grace saves us. Grace redeems us. Grace declares us righteous in Christ. Grace freely gives us eternal life. Grace empowers us for godly living. Grace avalanches love into our hearts. Grace teaches us how to live. Grace makes us eternally secure. Grace, you see, does it all.

Well, if Christ did all the work that was needed to provide this grace, what do we do? What is our role? Our part as sinners is to simply believe, believe that Christ died for our sin and was buried and rose again (I Cor. 15:3-4). Our part is to trust in the Person and Work of Christ. Our part is to do the only thing we can do without doing anything—set aside our own doing, our own merit, our own works, and our own performance so we can rely solely on the doing, the merit, the works, and the performance of Another, the Lord Jesus Christ, who accomplished it all for us when He finished His work on the Cross.

Some call this “cheap grace” and “easy believism.” But there is nothing cheap about it. It required the infinite cost of God the Father sending His Beloved Son to the Cross as a voluntary sacrifice for us! And there is nothing easy about it. The hardest thing for us sinners is to stop trusting in our own works and merit and to start trusting in the work and merit of Christ!

But when this happens, when we believe what God has told us about the finished work of Christ on the Cross, when our faith and His grace touch, it is like a match touching TNT, and there is an explosion of divine power that results in eternal salvation (Rom. 1:16).

Now we have come full circle. If our common understanding of grace falls far short, and the theologian's explanation misses the mark, what is a fuller, sounder, more biblical, more practical, more personal understanding of grace?

**GRACE IS
ALL GOD IS FREE TO DO FOR YOU AND ME
BECAUSE OF WHAT HIS SON DID
ON THE CROSS OF CALVARY!**

Today we have come together to celebrate the bonding together of Max and Joan in marriage. Marriage is a lifelong commitment that will face many challenges. Too often marriage is thought of in terms of “what my spouse will do for me.” How often have we heard someone say they want to get married because ‘he makes me happy’ or ‘she is beautiful’ or ‘he is a good bread winner’ or ‘she takes good care of me’.

But one morning every married person wakes up to realize that their spouse cannot always meet their needs. They are simply not big enough. Only God is big enough to fulfill all our needs and a marriage between two believers has a great advantage because the participants have access to the vast treasures of God's infinite grace.

When marriage occurs between two believers who recognize and appreciate that God has already met their need completely in Christ, and that He has already freely given them by grace more than they will ever need for time and eternity, and that He has already perfectly equipped them for any circumstance that might arise on this sin-cursed world freely by GRACE, the result is always victorious Christian living.

A successful marriage occurs when both husband and wife freely share with one another the things that God has already freely shared in grace with them. Two people, bonded in love, ministering the infinite riches of Christ to one another, experience, perhaps, a little bit of heaven right here on planet earth. And when this happens that old-fashioned marriage vow becomes a reality, producing a marriage truly characterized by love and cherishing...in sickness or in health...for richer or for poorer...for better or for worse...forsaking all others and keeping the one for the other so long as I live."

CONGRATULATIONS
MAX AND JOAN ADAMSKI!

From your friends—Steve and Cindy Walker

July 7, 2007

NOTHING TO PAY

Nothing to pay! Yes, this is true,
There is nothing left for the sinner to do.
There's nothing to pay to earn God's love;
There's nothing to pay for a home above.
The sinner has nothing good within;
The sinner has nothing to pay for sin.
No human can keep God's holy law
None can remove a single flaw.

God's debtors we are in our bankrupt state;
How can we pay our debt so great?
Apart from grace, though doing our best,
We find no pardon, peace or rest.
Christ came from Heaven to die on the tree.
Eternal life! God's gift, is free;

For God hath accepted the work of His Son,
He saves guilty sinners by the work He has done.

God saves by grace, without good deeds;
Christ is all that the sinner needs
This is the gospel so often we've heard
The message of grace in God's own Word.
Why should a sinner think he can aid?
Why should he pay what Christ has paid?
No value is there in a human plan;
But Christ tasted death for every man.

No payment more will God require,
What more than Christ should man desire?
Complete in Christ and justified,
Forgiven, cleansed and sanctified.
Let us thank God for His infinite grace;
And the Saviour Who was willing to die in our place,
To die on the cross to put sin away,
Rejoicing to know there's nothing to pay.

The work of our Saviour we'll never forget;
Forever we'll praise Him for paying our debt.
We'll honor and praise Him, looking above,
Seeking each day to be filled with His love.
Yes, looking to Jesus, we'll run well the race,
Depending each 'day on God's wonderful grace.
God's Word is true; we're sure of reward
For all that is done in the name of the Lord.

(Author unknown)

