

BIBLE STUDY: Romans Chapter 1

Scripture of Lesson: Romans 1: 1~32

1. Paul's calling as an apostle

The word 'apostle' comes from the Greek word '*apostolos*,' which means messenger or envoy. This term is traditionally reserved for the 12 apostles of Jesus because Jesus called them so. Because Judas betrayed their Lord and hanged himself, the 11 apostles chose Matthias as the replacement for Judas. [Acts 1: 16~26] But then how did Paul claim to be an apostle. It seems he based his claim because he was visited by the Lord Jesus on his way to Damascus to persecute the believers who had fled from the initial persecution in Jerusalem.

Paul recounted several times his experience of meeting Jesus on his way to Damascus as described in Acts 9.

As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." [Acts 9: 3-6]

In Acts 9 we read about Barnabas, who had helped Saul's acceptance in the Christian community, testifying to the church leaders in Jerusalem how Saul had met the Lord on the way to Damascus and how the Lord had directed Ananias to help Saul with his conversion. Based on his own testimony and the witness of his mentor, Paul was accepted into the fellowship of the Lord's apostles.

Paul's understanding of his mission as an apostle is clear in v. 5. It was "for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name." Paul's mission was to preach the gospel of Christ to all nations so that they could be brought to obey to the faith and to God for the name of Christ. In fact the Lord made it clear to Saul and to Barnabas that "he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel [Acts 9:15]." So Paul was ready to preach the gospel wherever the Spirit of Jesus led him [v. 15], even to Rome. Thus he desired to visit Rome, which came to be after some arduous experiences, which brought him to stand before the leaders of Israel and of Rome eventually as the Lord had intended. We need to remember that as we subject ourselves to be used by the Lord, He will take us to routes that we never intended to walk, or desired or deemed the most efficient, so that the Lord's intentions could be fulfilled.

Discussion topic: Have you received a personal mission for your life from God? Share the circumstance and what this mission has meant to you.

2. Paul's commitment to the gospel

Paul's understanding of the gospel was "it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believes; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek [v. 17]." To Paul the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel, "from faith to faith [V.17]." So God chose the seemingly foolish method of preaching the gospel by

faithful Christian evangelists to unbelieving souls so that faith might be engendered from the true faith of those who speak the message. Therefore, the work of the gospel requires that the preachers stand on solid, good faith in Christ and in the truth of God so that the seed that he/she has received from the Lord could germinate successfully in the hearts and lives of those who hear. Paul was not ashamed of the gospel because he believed he had thus been called to be God's messenger to all nations and knew that this gospel goes forth with the power of God to bring life to those who hear as he himself stood firm on the faith of the Lord that was growing and alive within him.

I have often wondered why Paul was so dedicated to his evangelical mission as an apostle of Christ, especially when considering how zealously he had persecuted the believers before his fateful trip to Damascus. Saul, as the prior life of Apostle Paul, was an ardent student of Jewish theology under the tutorship of Gamaliel in Jerusalem. His parents must have had the means to send their son from their hometown of Tarsus in today's Turkey to Jerusalem, which was the center of all Jewish culture, religion and certainly schooling. While learning everything about the Mosaic Law under the renowned and authoritative teacher, Gamaliel, Saul must have encountered Jesus during His visits to Jerusalem and its vicinity. And Saul could have been offended by any one of the messages Jesus spoke or performed. Jesus became a stumbling block to Saul. And he decided that this imposter from Galilee and His group must be rooted out. So he set out to kill, incarcerate and drive out the Christians from Israel.

However, as Saul continued to persecute the Christians out of his zeal for his Pharisaic beliefs, what he had seen in Jesus, in Stephen who had been stoned to death by those zealots as Saul himself, the spirit manifest in them, the way they faced death so calmly, praying for forgiveness of those who were killing them – must have kept troubling him, robbing him of peace. That is why, in his encounter with Jesus on the way to Damascus, Christ told him, "It is difficult for you to kick against the pricks." When Saul saw the brighter than the sun light shining around him and heard the message from Christ, he realized right away that he had been totally wrong in his views and beliefs of God, His salvation plan, Jesus and the Christians. The world turned upside down on him. Everything collapsed. And Saul repented and got converted. He became Paul, who was born again as a chosen vessel of God, dedicated to preaching the true gospel of Christ to all peoples, both Jews and the Gentiles.

Discussion topic: Share your own experience of how God dealt with you to bring you into obedience to the gospel of Christ.

3. God's wrath on the evils of this world

Why does Paul list the many iniquities and sins of the Roman world to the Christians in Rome? Christians in Rome were living in the midst of the decadent culture of Rome, which was the center of the political power as well as the culture as its highest in seeking all kinds of pleasures, excitements and other ways to satisfy depraved human minds. In the beginning of his letter to the Romans Paul is reminding these Christians that God is angry with these sins and there was no way that any Christian who corrupts his mind and life with these elements in serving and following Christ and to remain as a child of God. And he is reminding them there is a judgment waiting for this corrupt world. It is absolutely necessary in the 21st century also that when we take the message of the gospel to the world they be reminded there is judgment of God coming so as

to awaken them to the seriousness of the gospel message. This serious warning was necessary in the first century, has been necessary in every century and is particularly necessary in today's decadent culture not only in America but all over the world. We see overabundant evidences of decadence, evil and overt pursuit of pleasures, violence and greed.

God is fully justified in being angry towards the unbelievers because God has clearly shown His truth to all creation [v. 19]. The divine power, the unfathomable majesty of God's knowledge and generosity of His immense providence –these are all very evident in God's creation [v. 20]. Think of the sun which radiates boundless light and warmth to all living and the entire earth. We breathe clean air and drink clean water where they are not polluted by human activities and they are totally free in design. God's divine character and power have been revealed so clearly through the generations so that no one is excused for not seeking Him and worshipping Him as their God. God deserves our adoration, respect, fear and worship. When humans disregard their Creator, dishonors Him, shuns Him and denies His existence and being, such actions bring great displeasure to Him.

God is especially angry towards those who know and hold the truth of God and yet remain as unbelievers and enemies of God. In particular God is angry when people fail to glorify Him; remain ungrateful; keep vain, dark, and foolish thoughts in their hearts [v. 21-22]; worship idols and creatures [v. 23, 25]; engages in all forms of fornication, sexual perversion and immoral acts [v. 24, 26-27, 29-31]. God created humans in His image [Genesis 1: 26]. He gave us a mission to govern His creation and thus honor Him together with all creation under our stewardship [Genesis 1: 28]. This is a very honorable and glorious mission awarded to the humans and yet deprivation has been set in motion since the fall of Adam and Eve.

The first step for a person to take when we desire to be reconciled with God is to acknowledge that we are sinners before God. None of us can avoid the sinful state because the human DNA has been changed permanently due to the fall of Adam and Eve. We are sinners by nature because we are outside of God's promise and grace without the gospel of Christ. No matter how moral a person's life might be, her life is a life of a sinner outside of God's mercy and grace. Paul, by citing diverse kinds of iniquities and sins, which were prevalent in the then Roman society, was pointing out to the readers of his epistle the sinful state of all humans. Here now comes the gospel of Christ – to save such hopeless humans from their sinful life of darkness into the marvelous light in Christ Jesus.

Not many preachers today mention sin. Sin is a word that is avoided as much as possible. When a person is a drunkard, she must be a victim of her parent's alcoholism. A drug addict might be a victim of his parents' divorce or physical abuse. All sins have excuses and those who commit them are victims of some socio-economic ills of this country that need to be addressed through national or social programs. Those who are well educated, earn six-figure incomes and do not commit any legally punishable crimes feel they are not sinners. They just do not go to churches but argue they believe in God. What is your definition of sin today? Has God's definition of sin changed over the centuries? We are not talking about crimes but sin as a state of being 'without God in your life.' Outside of Christ we are all sinners to God. Let us confess that we are sinners and need God's mercy and grace. We need the blood of Jesus Christ to blot out our sins so that we can be made clean before God. Just imagine how God had made the provision for forgiveness of our sins even before we knew Him or sought Him. God made the sacrifice for the sinful humanity. And Christ was willing to fulfill God's plan of human salvation by coming to earth as a human and willing to die on the cross so that the blood

He shed on it could absolve all of our sins when we confess our faith in Him. What grace, what love our God has for us! What love Jesus Christ had for sinners like me that He was willing to die such a cruel death! But He has risen, and went up to Heaven and is now sitting at the right hand of God, looking down to earth, cheering and encouraging every Christian and welcoming every repentant sinner.

Discussion topic: Is the world any better today than in the first century? Does God change in His definition of sin and evil?