

Romans 3 - Calne Baptist Church 8th June 2025

Introductory Talk - *5 Minute Bible Study* - "Stories"

Are you sitting comfortably? And then I'll begin...

Stories are everywhere. Books. Films. TV. Stories closer to home to. Our personal stories. Stories in our families, in our communities. Stories which intertwine together. Stories which are shared.

In this sermon series we're looking at Paul's Letter to the Church in Rome. It's a letter, it is an explanation of what Jesus has done. There's no narrative, no plot. So why am I talking about stories?

The strange things about stories, shared stories, is that a brief reference can stand in for a larger thing. If we hear someone say, "I am your Father," we don't expect them to be making a statement of fact, they're referencing the story. If we call someone Scrooge, we don't mean that is their name, but rather they are acting in a way in which we would expect Ebenezer Scrooge to act, based on his actions in the book. If my family ask me whether I would like "a small Fanta", they're not asking if I would like a drink, but rather referencing an embarrassing story which happened regarding my command of the German language.

So although Romans doesn't have a narrative, it does reference back to a bigger story. But if we're not alert to it, then we miss the references and then don't really follow about what Paul is talking. Can you imagine the confusion if you said "I am your Father" to someone who knew nothing about Star Wars? That's the situation we would be in.

So what's the big story that Paul is referring to in Romans?

Are you sitting comfortably? And then I'll begin ...

Before the beginning was God. Great. Good. Creative.

And God made a beginning. He created Creation.

Everything we can see. Stars. Planets. Animals. Plants. Insects.

And God created humanity, to be a bit like himself. Creative. To be in relationship with God and with each other. To be stewards of God's creation, to care for it. The Bible calls this being made in the Image of God.

But humanity rebelled, and separation came in. Separation to each other. Separation from God's Creation. Separation from God.

But God had a rescue plan. He called Abraham and promised him a family, the family of God. And promised that through him all nations would be blessed.

Eventually Abraham's family found themselves as slaves in Egypt, and cried out to God for freedom. And God freed them from slavery and led them out of Egypt. He made them a nation, and gave them Law, to help them be in relationship with God, with each other and with creation. Particularly they were to be a light to the nations, to teach and help people see who God is and how he made us to live.

But God's nation fell and stumbled, and were not the light they were called to be. And so, God came as Jesus, the faithful Israelite, descendent of Abraham, to rescue His nation, His family, His world.

And as to all the things that Jesus did and taught? Well, that's another story.

Main Talk

Thank you all for the invitation to share with you today.

In this epic series on Paul's Letter to the Church at Rome we've arrived at episode 3. But Romans is a long and complicated book, so it's good to remind ourselves of where we are. So Previously In "Romans: The Letter"...

Paul is writing to the church in Rome, a mixed church of Jews and non-Jews. Jews - including the Jewish Christians - had earlier been thrown out of Rome, and now had come back, into churches which for a while had been Gentile only.

After some introductory remarks, Paul states the general theme of his letter - "[the gospel] is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes... for in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith". Which begs the obvious question, who needs saving, from what and how? Paul then answers the who and from what question over the rest of chapter 1, through chapter 2 and into chapter 3.

There are lot of threads that Paul is weaving together in this chapter 3, I can't possibly cover it all in one talk, but I hope I can pull enough together to help us understand what Paul is saying. We're going to look at the chapter under 3 headings: God's Faithfulness and God's people; God's faithfulness and God's Covenant; and, Sin and Grace.

God's Faithfulness and God's People (vv1-8)

Given his condemnation of the Jews and their disobedience to the law, Paul asks at the start of chapter 3, "Have the Jews any advantage over the Gentiles?". One would expect the answer, "not at all!" His answer is quite the opposite though, "Much, indeed, in every way!". Why? God trusted his message to the Jews - 'oracles'. The Greeks were very much after divine oracles, revelations from the gods. Paul is being clear that in contrast in the natural revelation of God he talked about in chapter 1, which is available to everyone, the specific revelation of God was given to the Jews.

If you've been in churches a long time it you've probably picked up that Paul is has a pretty negative view of the Old Testament law. But I don't think that's entirely true.

This is our Japanese kitchen knife. Beautiful. Effective. Unless it's a weapon!

If we look back at chapter 2 vv17b-20 - we can see some of the good things about the Law we learn what God wants us to do, we learn to choose what is right, it is a guide and it is truth. These definitely seem like good things! As an aside when Paul says Law he may be referring to the Torah - the first 5 books of the bible, or he maybe referring to the entire Jewish scriptures. He certainly isn't referring only to only the rules and regulations parts we find in Exodus through to Deuteronomy.

But if the law is good, what's the problem?

Need to go back to our big story...

God especially called Abraham's people to be a nation - Israel. His people. But this was so that they could be a light to the nations, to demonstrate God's character to a world that had gone wrong. The law was meant to be a guide and a teacher, one which can 'instruct the foolish and teach the ignorant' - to point to the way in which the world is not right. AND it was also meant to point to the way the world should be, with perfect relationships - God to human, human to human and with all of creation.

But in the hands of sinful humanity, it also became a weapon.

Rather than Israel being a blessing to the nations, rather than them using it to teach and guide about God's ways, it had become a badge of exclusivity, something to be hoarded. But that's not it means to be 'entrusted' with something. If I entrust my children to take a plate of biscuits to visitors, I don't expect them to eat them on the way. The biscuit wasn't for their benefit, it was for our visitors. Similarly Israel had been entrusted with the revelation of God, to be stewards of it, but it wasn't for their benefit alone.

It wasn't great within Israel either. Those who thought that they were better at keeping the law looked down on those they perceived as not being so good at keeping the law.

This was one reason why Jesus' ministry was so controversial - a good law-keeper would never associate with Gentiles and the law-breakers. The blessings of the law were to be kept for those who - in their own minds at least - were good at keeping it.

So, there was an advantage to being Jewish, because you had received God's special revelation of who He is and had received the law. But look at verse 3 - "But what if some of them were not faithful? Does this mean that God will not be faithful?" The answer is an emphatic no! Paul says that even if "every man is a liar" than "God will be true". God will never give up on the Jewish people.

This I find to be really encouraging. As news has come out about the what certain people in the church have done, the abuse of position, even from some people that I regarded as heroes of the faith. I've sometimes found it hard not to be cynical about the church. On a more local level, I'm sure that we've had times when the church has not worked as it should, and we've been hurt.

But I believe that this promise is for the church as well, it is a promise for all of us. Even if every single one of us is unfaithful, God will still be faithful to the church. God will not abandon us. Even if we are false to him, false to each other, then God's promises to us are true.

God's Faithfulness and God's Covenant (vv9-20)

Paul starts of this section with the same question as at the start of chapter 3 - are the Jews in an advantageous position. Last time, his answer was "Indeed, in every way!". This time, however, he says "Not at all!". Is Paul contradicting himself?

A better translation rather than "Not at all!" maybe "Not ultimately!". Of course being entrusted with the revelations of God is a good thing, but in the end the power of sin is active in both Jews and Gentiles and both are subject to judgement. Romans 2:11 says that "God judges everyone by the same standard".

Paul says in Romans 3:20 that "what the Law does is to make us know that we have sinned."

The law isn't there so that we should learn from our mistakes. Children at school get "WWW"s and "EBI"s - *What Went Wells* and *Even Better Ifs*. The EBIs are there to help them to learn. But no amount of EBIs can get is to the point where we can obey perfectly.

And even if we did, it would not put us into a relationship with the creator again. In fact, it would move us away, because we would think ourselves independent, not needing that intimacy with God.

If we are ill, then we need a good diagnosis as to what is wrong, a wrong diagnosis won't help. But a good diagnosis won't make us get better, for that we need the right cure. We need something external to make us well again. The law is good, we get a good diagnosis of our condition - we know that we have sinned. But it's not a cure.

We need something external to be our cure. The surprising message we find is that the external thing is provided by God himself, Jesus Christ, the gift of God's grace. But we're getting ahead of ourselves, and we'll return to that thought presently.

Throughout this first part of Romans Paul has been given a devastating critique of humanity. However, there is nothing in the way of Jesus about frightening people into the kingdom of God out of fear of punishment. Rather, grace comes first. Paul himself, before meeting with Jesus on the Damascus road, considered himself a righteous individual. It was only afterwards that he looked at all his store of goodness, and discovered it was full of fakes. Grace comes, we discover that actually we're not as good as we thought that we were, and we come under God's mercy and a new relationship with him.

One final thought on this section. Paul assembles a whole list of Bible references to make his point in verses 10 through 18 - they come from Ecclesiastes, Psalms and Isaiah. It is a quick fire summary of the way humanity has gone wrong. It's not that each individual conspicuously shows all of these actions, but rather that they are characteristic of human nature.

The interesting thing about all of them is that they are quoting from people who are helpless before evil. And in each case in the passages from which Paul is quoting there is a promise that God will act to rescue, and to keep faithful to his covenant.

Rescue has always been part of God's covenants. God promised that one of Eve's descendents would bruise Satan's head. God remembered his promise to Abraham and Jacob, and brought the Israelites out of Egypt. God promised Israel that if they were disobedient and were scattered to the nations, he would bring them back. Throughout the prophets God promises to restore Israel, because of who he is and because of his covenant.

God has always been faithful to his promises.

And just as the people quotes are helpless before evil, so are we all. Paul says that "Jews and Gentiles alike are under the power of sin." Paul sees sin not only as wrongdoing, but as a power, something almost with a life of its own. Perhaps in English, we might say that Sin, with a capital S. But despite the power of Sin at work in the world, God is at hand with a rescue. God is faithful to his covenant and will be faithful to his covenant. He is our rescuer.

Sin and Grace (vv21-26)

We've now arrived at the most famous part of Romans 3. Up until now Paul has been arguing how all of humanity is under judgement, and now starts with a new thread of how we can be put right with God, which will last the next few chapters.

Look at verse 23 - the Good News says it slightly strangely, so I'll read from the NRSV.

For there is no distinction [between Jews and Gentiles] since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; (Romans 3:22b-23 NRSVA)

When we hear about *the glory of God*, we think of the glory of God's presence. The glory that Moses was only permitted to see the back of. The smoke and light at the consecration of the Temple that meant all had to leave. If that's the glory to which we're meant to be measuring up to, then that's really being set up to fail!

But the bible also talks about a different glory of God - and again this references back to our story. God's glory in Creation was meant to be humans. We were meant to exercise God's lordship via our stewardship, living in close relationship with God, demonstrating his love and care to each other and to his creation. In short, to be image-bearers of the Almighty God. Look at Psalm 8:4-6. There is the question:

What are human beings, that you think of them; mere mortals, that you care for them? (Psalm 8:4 GNB).

Then

Yet you made them inferior only to yourself; you crowned them with glory and honour. You appointed them rulers over everything you made; you placed them over all creation: (Psalm 8:5-6 GNB)

This is the glory that Paul is talking about here. In our God image-bearing mission, we've all come up short.

But God has been faithful to his promises, and done something. He has indeed been a rescuer!

Look at verse 21 (NRSV): "But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets".

Let's break that down.

- **"But now"** - it's happened. There is a hope!
- **"Irrespective of law"** - this is not a diagnosis. This is a cure. This is the external thing to make us well.
- **"Has been disclosed"** - Jesus came in history. His life and death and resurrection has shown God's righteousness. Our cure has broken into our world.
- **"Is attested by the law and the prophets"** - it was to this that the scriptures were pointing to. The scriptures showed our need, but also they showed the way forward to our need.

And God brings people into this righteousness through Jesus - verse 22:

"God puts people right through their faith in Jesus Christ. God does this to all who believe in Christ".

What does Paul have to say about it? He says a few things briefly, which will be picked up over the next few chapters and expanded in more detail.

Firstly, it's a "free gift of God's grace." (v24) It's God's initiative from beginning to end. It's a free gift - we have no contribution to make, we receive all and contribute nothing. And it's motivated by God's grace - his love and mercy towards sinful humanity. And again, this will come up again in chapter 5.

Now looking forward to chapter 6 and 7, Paul says that Christ, "sets us free". The word used is *redemption*, which means someone paying the price to buy you out of slavery. God freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and he has done the same for each one of us. He has freed us from being slaves to the power of Sin. I love this image.

We were slaves, we are now free. We've been given manumission papers. When Satan comes as says, "you're a sinner, come back," we can wave the papers at him. They've been signed with Jesus' blood - there's nothing Satan can do to take us back into slavery.

And yet, we do continue to fall short of the glory of God. What's going on? We don't have slavery, but I thought one analogy might be prison. We are captives, imprisoned by Sin's power. But in prison or other institutions, we hear of people being institutionalised. When people are let out, their thought patterns and behaviour is like they were still in prison. And I think we're like that. We are DEFINITELY freed from the slavery of Sin. Jesus has done that. We were slaves. We are now not. That is a categorical change. And yet we still think like we're in slavery to Sin. We say we are sinners saved by grace - which is true, but we are saved for transformation. Jesus has paid the price for our freedom, but he didn't pay the price for us to stay as we are. We are now God's saints. Saints who often fall short of the glory of God, maybe, but by God's grace that doesn't change our category. We remain on God's side, with the presence of God.

Conclusion

It's been a bit of long walk through. I hope I haven't bored you all. But here's the quick run down:

- God has remained faithful to his people, and to his covenants with them, even when his people were not faithful to him
- The law is good, but is only a diagnosis of sin, and not a cure
- But God's faithfulness meant that he put forward a rescue - Jesus, who was faithful even to death on the cross
- In doing so, God made it possible for all to become part of his people, people who have accepted his free gift of grace, freed from the slavery of Sin, having the presence of God with them, and forgiven of sins by the blood of Jesus
- Now this people can be transformed to live according God's intention for humanity - in relationship with himself, through faith in Christ, in relationship with each other and to exercise stewardship on God's behalf in creation.