

The Story of the Gospel

Rich Nathan

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Romans: The Gospel of God Series

Romans 1:1-7

The way we human beings make sense of the world around us is to fit whatever we are experiencing into a storyline. What am I talking about regarding fitting our experiences into a storyline?

Following the tragic events of 9/11 in which thousands of people lost their lives in the terrorist attack on the United States, different storylines began emerging regarding the meaning of the attack. Some people said the reason the U.S. was attacked was because it is an imperialist country that goes around dominating Muslim countries; the U.S. just got what it deserved. Other people looked at 9/11 and said the reason that America was attacked was because there are evil people in the world who hate the fact that we are a good, free and democratic country. Some people from the conspiracy crowd looked at 9/11 and said that the President of the U.S. actually knew about the attacks beforehand and he did nothing because he wanted a pretext to attack Iraq. And then there were even a few anti-Semitic bigots, who said the World Trade Center was not attacked by Arab terrorists; it was bombed by the Israelis to get Americans to attack Arab countries. And the Jews in the World Trade Center were all warned ahead of time to not show up for work and thousands called in sick that morning.

Now, this last storyline is complete absolute rubbish. But this story spread throughout the Muslim world.

Pastor Tim Keller, of Redeemers Church in New York, wrote a wonderful new book on work titled [Every Good Endeavor](#).

Book Cover [Every Good Endeavor](#) by Tim Keller

Pastor Keller talks about how all of meaning in life is found by attaching it to a storyline. He quotes a philosopher named Alasdair MacIntyre using this illustration. He says: Suppose you are standing at a bus stop and someone you do not know comes up to you and shouts at you saying, “I’ve got it! The Latin name of the wild duck is histrionicus histrionicus.” Now, you understand the sentence, but for it to have any meaning, it has to be attached to a story. Maybe you look at the man and you say to yourself, this guy is mentally ill. He goes around shouting the Latin names of wild ducks to people. He’s mentally ill – that would explain it. Or you say, this man probably works at the local library and he was asked a question about the Latin name for the wild duck and he has mistaken me for the person who inquired. A third possibility is this young man is a

Russian spy and the Latin name for the wild duck is designed to identify his American contact.

Depending on the story you attach this sentence to, you could have very different results. If you call the police when it is a simple case of mistaken identity, you will be humiliated. If he really is a foreign spy and you challenge him, maybe you will be assassinated.

In any case, our response to things is totally determined by the story that's in our heads when we experience something. There are so many different stories floating around. Everyone in the world is living out some story in their minds that gives their lives meaning. For some the story you fit all of your life into is that you are constantly victimized by every male authority in your life – your father, a teacher, a principal, a boss, your husband. And so whenever you experience from other men, who are in authority, you embed those experiences in your larger story about what men in authority are like.

For some of you, you reverse the story and it concerns women in your life. Maybe you've been stabbed in the back by girlfriends, or by ex-wives. You've been betrayed. And so you interpret everything about the female gender from the storyline that all women are liars and cheats.

We all have stories that we tell ourselves. Your story may be a story of victimization. Someone else's story may be a story of what it means to be a real man. Real men don't let themselves be pushed around...ever. Real men don't show emotion.

We all have stories that we tell ourselves. And the story we find ourselves in will determine the course of our lives.

2000 years ago in the 1st century AD there was a man named Paul who wrote to a letter to the church in the City of Rome in which Paul expressed in considerable detail what he believed to be the one true big story in which all of life would find its meaning. The story that Paul told was the story of the Gospel of God. Today, I'm starting a 16-week series from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans that will take us from now all the way to Christmas. I've called today's message, "The Story of the Gospel." Let's pray.

Romans 1:1–7 (NIV)

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience of faith for his name's sake. And you also are among those Gentiles who are

called to belong to Jesus Christ. To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

The writer of this book identifies himself in v. 1 as Paul.

Romans 1:1 (NIV)

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—

There is almost no one in history who has ever doubted that this letter was written by the same Apostle Paul, who was an orthodox Jewish man living in the 1st century, an orthodox Jewish man who became a radical follower of Jesus, the Messiah, as the result of his experience of the risen Jesus while Paul was on the road to Damascus. The letter was written sometime around 55-56 AD most likely from the city of Corinth in Greece where Paul was staying for several months.

Paul's travel plans were to go back to Jerusalem where he would deliver a financial gift from the Gentile churches in Asia and Europe to the financially struggling Jewish church in Jerusalem. And from Jerusalem, he then planned to travel to Rome to stay with the Roman church for a while and have the Roman church send him on his way to the western edge of the Roman Empire. Paul planned to go all the way to Spain.

Now, Paul had never visited the church in Rome before. The church in Rome was actually made up of several house churches. But he heard about the church and he heard that a split was forming between Jewish Christians, who were still tied to the Jewish law and Gentile Christians, who scorned anything that was Jewish and who felt superior to the Jewish Christians, who still kept the Sabbath, and the laws of Kashrut – the laws of food cleanliness – what they could eat and what they couldn't.

The way that Paul deals with the news of this split that was occurring between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians tells us so much about how the Bible approaches life's problems. Whatever problem you have there is a basic approach to that problem laid out in the Bible that has to do with immersing ourselves in the story of the Gospel. Paul does not say to the Roman church, "Hey, men and women, you really need a course on listening skills. Here are three constructive tips on communicating to one another better."

A course on listening skills is a helpful thing. My wife would tell you that I would do well taking a class like that. But developing listening skills is not a big enough message to heal the split that was taking place in the church in Rome.

Paul doesn't say, "Listen, you Gentile Christians give a little bit. Start worshipping God on the Sabbath day as the Jews do. And you Jewish Christians, loosen up a little bit.

Have a ham sandwich.” Instead, what Paul does for 16 chapters is remind the church in Rome about what story they find themselves in. He says:

The Gospel is a foundational story

Romans 1:1 (NIV)

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—

He tells us right off the bat that this over 7000-word letter (which is Paul’s longest letter) that I’m writing to you is an exposition of the gospel of God. And if you didn’t understand what the book was about, look at v. 2:

Romans 1:2 (NIV)

...the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures

And look at v. 9:

Romans 1:9 (NIV)

...God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you

And in v. 15:

Romans 1:15 (NIV)

That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome.

Years ago I heard Pastor Tony Evans tell a story of waking up one morning in his house and seeing a crack in his bedroom wall. The next day the crack got bigger. And then Pastor Evans said that the crack brought along with it some aunts, uncles, and cousins and pretty soon the whole wall in his bedroom had cracks all over it. He called a contractor in to replaster the wall and to paint it. The contractor looked around the house and said to Tony Evans, “That will be \$25,000.” Pastor Evans said, “You’re kidding! You are charging me \$25,000 for plastering the wall and painting it?” The contractor said, “No! The \$25,000 is to completely redo your entire foundation. You’ve got a major crack in the foundation of your house. If I just plaster the wall as you want me to and repaint it, the crack will come back in a week. So what do you want me to do? Do you want me to just replaster the wall and paint it, or do you want me to fix the foundation?”

Friends, so many people are just plastering over the cracks of their lives. Married couples do this all the time. There is a crack in the foundation – a major crack – a complete lack of trust, a secret addiction, mental illness, an affair, a refusal to work, of

our marriage; a problem emerges, and we plaster it over and repaint. And the crack comes back again, and again, and again, and brings its aunts, uncles and cousins. Pretty soon we have cracks all over our marriage.

Individuals do this all the time. We experience a lack of peace, a lack of meaning, a lack of fulfillment, a lack of sense of purpose, a lack of hope. And what do we do with these lacks? We plaster them over. I can find meaning in life by embedding my life in the story of work. Life is all about finding a job you love and devoting yourself entirely to that. I can find meaning and purpose in life by completely devoting myself to my family. I'm going to be the best father, the best mother, the best husband or wife, the best son or daughter that anyone has ever seen. I'm going to find meaning in life; I'm going to find purpose; I'm going to find hope; I'm going to find peace by working like crazy to make this world a better place, working for justice, fighting for rights, or fighting against the breakdown of morals in our country, fighting for moral absolutes. That's the story that gives my life meaning.

The Apostle Paul says that there is only one great story that you can build your life on, that you can build your marriage on, that you can build a church on, that you can reconcile relationships through – only one big foundational story that won't result in you having to plaster the walls of your life over and over again. It is building your life on the foundational story of the gospel of God. The gospel is not only a foundational story:

The gospel is a unique story

Look with me again at v. 1-2:

Romans 1:1–2 (NIV)

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures

Paul always speaks about THE gospel. He never says he came preaching A gospel, one gospel among many other gospels. The gospel is unique. It stands alone. It stands supreme. It is the one and only gospel. It is the gospel of God, the gospel regarding God's Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Paul was claiming uniqueness for the gospel of God in a 1st century culture that worshipped many gods and had many gospels. The Roman Empire absorbed into itself hundreds of gods from the ancient Greeks. And as the Romans sent its army out to the Middle East and to Persia, it brought back all of these Persian gods. Every home and family had its own gods.

They not only had many gods, they had many gospels. Here is an excerpt of a letter that was written a few decades before Paul wrote to the Romans. The letter was written by a Roman governor and it said this:

Since Providence which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit human kind, by sending him as a savior, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance...surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god, Augustus, was the beginning of the gospel for the world that came by reason of them.

Paul was in a world in which people tried to find meaning in life through the story of different gods. They tried to build their lives on the foundation of different gospels. Paul preached the gospel of God which centers on Jesus Christ our Lord as THE gospel.

In our day, we have many gospels. Go into any bookstore and tell the clerk that you are looking for a book regarding a problem you are facing in life and you won't be directed to the Bible section or to the Book of Romans, you will be directed to the self-help section, the addiction and recovery section. There will be shelf after shelf after shelf of self-help books.

What makes the gospel of God unique in our day is that the gospel of God is good news, not good advice. The gospel of God is not something we do to make it work. The gospel of God is something that God did that we are only asked to believe. The gospel is the story of what God did through Jesus Christ to heal God's relationship with us human beings.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who is one of my all-time favorite preachers, said he could tell immediately whether someone understands that the gospel is good news and not good advice by asking the person this diagnostic question. He said he asked people, "Are you now ready to say about yourself that you are a Christian?" And if a person hesitates, if they say, "Well, I'm not really that good; there are still things in my life that need to change; there are still areas that I need to clean up; there are still relationships that need to be fixed." If the person says anything regarding themselves and their behavior, Lloyd-Jones said, "I immediately know they don't understand the gospel." Let me quote from Lloyd-Jones. He says:

At once I know that...they are still thinking in terms of themselves; their idea still is that they have to make themselves good enough to be a Christian...It sounds very modest, but it is the lie of the devil, it is the denial of the faith...you will never be good enough; nobody has ever been good enough. The essence of Christian salvation is to say that Christ is good enough and that I trust in Him.

We understand life by attaching our experiences to a story. The book of Romans offers us a great story; it is a foundational story; it is a unique story. Paul says:

The gospel is an old story

Romans 1:2 (NIV)

...the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures

I am reminded of that wonderful gospel hymn that has the chorus:

***I love to tell the story,
'twill be my theme in glory,
To tell the old, old story
Of Jesus and his love.***

Paul always insisted wherever he preached the gospel that the gospel of God was not a new message. It wasn't something that emerged in the Gentile world in the 1st century AD. Paul always insisted that the gospel of God was an old, old story that had its roots way back in the Hebrew Bible.

During communion we read this text of scripture. Let's look at it again:

1 Corinthians 15:1–4 (NIV)

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,

Christ died according to the scriptures. What scriptures is Paul referring to? Christ rose according to the scriptures? What scriptures? He is not referring to the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke or John which hadn't even been written when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. Paul is referring to the Old Testament scriptures. He is saying the death and resurrection of Christ was already spoken about in the old, old stories found in the Hebrew Bible.

Jesus said the same thing following his resurrection. He met two disciples on the road to Emmaus. We read these words in Luke 24:25-27:

Luke 24:25–27 (NIV)

He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

Jesus' own self-understanding was that his life and ministry, his death and resurrection could only be understood if you understood the old, old story that began back in the book of Genesis. I want you to see the gospel in one particularly important text from the Old Testament, Isaiah 52:1-7:

Isaiah 52:1–7 (NIV)

Awake, awake, Zion,

clothe yourself with strength!

Put on your garments of splendor,

Jerusalem, the holy city.

The uncircumcised and defiled

will not enter you again.

2 Shake off your dust;

rise up, sit enthroned, Jerusalem.

Free yourself from the chains on your neck,

Daughter Zion, now a captive.

3 For this is what the LORD says:

“You were sold for nothing,

and without money you will be redeemed.”

4 For this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

“At first my people went down to Egypt to live;

lately, Assyria has oppressed them.

5 “And now what do I have here?” declares the LORD.

“For my people have been taken away for nothing,

and those who rule them mock,”

declares the LORD.

“And all day long

my name is constantly blasphemed.

6 Therefore my people will know my name;

therefore in that day they will know

that it is I who foretold it.

Yes, it is I.”

7 How beautiful on the mountains

are the feet of those who bring good news,

who proclaim peace,

who bring good tidings,

**who proclaim salvation,
who say to Zion,
“Your God reigns!”**

Isaiah is writing at a time in Israel’s history where a horrible thing has happened. The Israelites have been exiled from their land. They’ve lost their land. They’ve lost their temple. They’ve lost their hope. They are sitting in the foreign land of Babylon as slaves and exiles. If ever a group of people needed to hear good news, it was the Israelites at this time. And in this portion of scripture, Isaiah uses the word that we translate “gospel” – good news, good tidings in v.7.

Isaiah 52:7 (NIV)

**7 How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of those who bring good news,
who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings,
who proclaim salvation,
who say to Zion,
“Your God reigns!”**

He is saying, “Wake up, Israel. Your days of hopelessness and desolation are about to end. Look up to the mountains. There is a messenger running and he has a message for you.” The messenger comes into the city gasping saying, “Good news! You have been redeemed. It is peace. It is good. It is salvation. God reigns! We’re set free. We can return to our homes. We can go back to the promised land. The days of captivity are over. The days of salvation have come.”

The gospel is a foundational story; it is a unique story; it is an old, old story. And the gospel is:

The gospel is a comprehensive story

The gospel of God is the big story, the grand narrative in which everything in life finds its proper place, its meaning, its alignment. Listen, a good story has a wonderful beginning, a tension-filled middle, and a fantastic ending that resolves the tension. And so the great story of the gospel of God has a wonderful beginning, a beginning that doesn’t start in the book of Matthew in the New Testament. The gospel of God starts way back in the first chapter of the first book of the Bible in Genesis 1. Genesis 1 answers some really big questions about life:

- Why is there something, rather than nothing? Because God spoke and the world came into existence.
- Where are we? What is the nature of this world and universe? Where are we? We’re on a good earth created by a good God.

- Who are we? What does it mean to be human? Are we just animals whose brains have evolved a little bit further than other animals? Are we accidents? Just a random product of a lightning storm hitting some chemical soup billions of years ago? What does it mean to be human? Genesis 1 says to be human is to be made in the image of God – male and female. We human beings are created in the image of God.

Then in Genesis 3 we answer the question: what's wrong with the world? If you go back in history, everyone realized there was something wrong with the world. Things are not working the way we sense they should work. Everyone feels that there is something broken. What's wrong with the world?

The philosopher, Plato, said what's wrong with the world is matter. Matter is evil. Our bodies are evil. We need to escape our bodies and become mere spirits.

The French philosopher, Rousseau, said what's wrong with the world is society. People are born good, but they are corrupted by society – by schools, by parents, by learning.

For Karl Marx the problem with the world was unjust economic systems.

For Sigmund Freud the problem with the world is traumatic childhood experiences.

For Edward Wilson the problem with the world is our genes.

If you ask people today what's wrong with the world, you will get an earful. The problem with the world is the rich keep getting richer and the poor keep getting poorer. The problem is poverty. The problem is ignorance.

The gospel story tells us that all of these theories of what's wrong with the world are just symptoms of the deeper problem. We human beings are separated from God. Genesis 3 tells us that what's wrong with the world is sin. We human beings have turned our backs on God. And as the result of that we experience psychological alienation within ourselves. We feel confused and ashamed. We lack peace. We feel hopeless. Genesis 3 tells us that as a result of sin we experience relational alienation. We don't get along with each other. Our relationships are strained in the workplace, in our families, in our churches, in our nations. There are ethnic conflicts and religious conflicts, and marital conflicts, and church conflicts. We experience relational alienation, separation from each other because of sin.

As a result of sin, we experience physical alienation. Instead of drawing near to God, we turn our backs and run from him. We find ourselves at war with our environment. We experience sickness and sorrow, the physical breakdown of our bodies, the loss of health and even death.

And as the result of sin, we experience spiritual alienation. Instead of easily connecting with the God who made us, we feel like we're far from God. We struggle to believe that God loves us. We struggle to connect with God, or to experience his presence.

The gospel of God is a comprehensive story. It answers the big questions: where do we come from? Where do we find ourselves now? What does it mean to be human? What's wrong with the world? And it answers the really big question - how will this world be healed?

Depending on how you diagnose the problem, what's wrong with the world, you are going to offer different solutions. If the problem is fundamentally economic, then you will say that the answer to what ails the world is financial; it's economic. If the problem is ignorance, then the solution is education. If the problem is trauma, then psychiatry is the answer.

The Apostle Paul says all of these are partial answers. Partial answers aren't wrong, but these partial answers need to be fit into the big comprehensive story. Paul says what's wrong with the world is that we human beings are separated from our Creator. And we will never be able to settle and be able to fix all of these other problems until we deal with the primary problem – the problem of our broken relationship with God.

The gospel is a comprehensive story in which all the rest of life can be viewed.

The gospel is a Christ-centered story

Romans 1:2–4 (NIV)

...the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.

The central figure of the gospel is Jesus Christ our Lord. The main actor in the story of the gospel is not you and me. The gospel is the story concerning God's Son. God's good news is about Jesus. Martin Luther said:

Here the door is thrown open wide for the understanding of Holy Scripture, that is, that everything must be understood in relationship to Christ.

Calvin writes:

The whole gospel is contained in Christ. Therefore to move even a step from Christ means to withdraw oneself from the gospel.

The whole gospel is contained in Christ. Therefore to remove oneself from Christ is to separate oneself from the gospel. If we take a step away from Christ, then we separate ourselves from the gospel of God.

Some people say: I just want to add one little thing to what the Apostle Paul is saying here. I just want to add this one little thing, that along with Jesus the Son of God, I want to say that the gospel also concerns people who are good. Don't insist that the gospel story is necessarily a Christ-centered story. The gospel has to include good people whatever they believe about Jesus, to get to God. Don't insist that people get to God through the activity of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Don't say that if we answer the question differently concerning who Jesus is, that if we reject the Apostle Paul's description of Jesus that we are missing the gospel.

Romans 1:3–4 (NIV)

...regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, 4 and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.

I just want to add this one little thing – include good people of no faith or different faith. I just differ at this one tiny point about Jesus, but I still want the gospel.

But is it a little thing to say that if you're good enough, God will accept you? No, that's a huge thing. The road that leads to God is bigger than that because the gospel message is not just for good people. See, every system in the world says the good people get in, but the bad people are kept out. But in the gospel, God says, "I'm welcoming everyone will go through Jesus – everyone – people who are successes and people who are failures; people who were adored by their parents and people who were abused by their parents, everyone; people who were valedictorians and people who were high school drop outs. The gospel says everyone and anyone can come to God through Jesus – people who are bankers, and people who are bankrupt, people who live in million dollar homes and people who live in a tent. Accountants and addicts, doctors and patients, 8 year olds and 80 year olds. Everyone and anyone can come to God through Jesus.

Christianity is the only truly universal faith. It is not tied to any ethnic group. It is not tied to any nationality or culture or language or age or IQ. It doesn't ask are you a success or a failure. It doesn't ask about the color of your skin or your height or weight. People from every culture, every language, and every religious background, able-bodied or disabled, can come to God through Jesus.

And finally,

The gospel is a response-demanding story

Romans 1:5 (NIV)

Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake.

The gospel is not like a movie you go to that at the end you say: that was a great story! What a great script. I really enjoyed that. And then you go on living life the way you lived it before you saw the movie. The gospel is not just a story that is designed for our entertainment, our amusement, or for us to debate about or to discuss in Bible studies, in churches, or in philosophy classes. The Apostle Paul says in v. 5 that the gospel demands a response – to get the story that God has done everything necessary to heal the fundamental problem that exists - the problem of human alienation from himself. He's done everything necessary to heal that problem through the life, death and resurrection of his son Jesus Christ, who is now appointed Lord of all.

Paul says the gospel of God demands a response. He calls the response in v. 5:

Romans 1:5

Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience of faith for his name's sake.

What does Paul mean by the “obedience of faith”? Some people say that he is talking about obedience that springs from faith. They say faith is the root and obedience is the fruit. Some people say that he is talking about the obedience of the Christian that is to follow our initial faith. That's a possible meaning.

But I think what the Apostle is saying is that the only proper response to the gospel is an obedience which is faith. The idea is this. When you hear the gospel message that God has done everything necessary to heal our relationship with himself through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ who is now appointed Lord of all – good news – the fundamental problem which is the root of all other problems, our separation from God – good news, God has healed that problem and is going about healing all the other problems that face us – physical, relational, and psychological. Paul says the only proper response to this news is to submit to the news, to embrace the news, to surrender yourself to the news, to listen to the news, to believe it, and to give your life over to this good news.

Paul is saying to take your life, all the moments of your past, your present and your future – all that you are, all that you have been, all that you ever hope to be – and embed it in the story of the gospel. And there you will find life, real life, life worth living. Let's pray.

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Rich Nathan

September 1, 2013

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