

***Romans 1:1-7***

***Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God— <sup>2</sup> the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures <sup>3</sup> regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, <sup>4</sup> and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. <sup>5</sup> Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. <sup>6</sup> And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. <sup>7</sup> To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ***

**The faithfulness of God makes all the difference**

A life was forever changed by a miracle. A man whose life was headed in one direction has his life suddenly turned around by a remarkable encounter, a fortunate series of events, or by a message that made a powerful impact on his heart on his mind and on his life. Turn on the television this week and you are very likely to run across a movie with such a theme. Think Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* or George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life*, even the dad in the movie *Elf*, and any other number of characters in similar Christmas movies and you will know what I mean. It is a popular and often captivating plot line to have a character make such a dramatic turn around, and therefore it has become a somewhat popular tradition this time of the year to gather friends and family to watch our favorite Christmas movies that involve such a twist.

A life that was forever changed by a miracle. A man whose life was headed in one direction has his life suddenly turned around by a remarkable encounter, a fortunate series of events, or by a message that made a powerful impact on his heart, on his mind, and on his life. One could argue that the apostle Paul's life story was just as dramatic, if not more dramatic than any classic Christmas story. A persecutor of the church, one who breathed out murderous threats against Christ's church, and then his life was forever changed. The LORD Jesus Christ called out to him with the gospel and there was this tremendous turn around in his life. And now Paul had been enlisted by God to live according to His holy will and share this powerful message with the world.

In these opening verses of the book of Romans Paul, speaks in such dramatic terms briefly describing his life changing encounter. As he describes how his life was turned around and how the lives of others are changed and transformed his focus is on one thing: the gospel. This is the one thing that truly changes hearts and lives in this life and for all eternity: the good news of God's grace in Christ Jesus.

And so, embedded in this opening greeting Paul not only extends pleasantries with the saints in Rome and establishes his authority as an apostle but he also lays down a powerful message describing the good news of Jesus. Inspired by the Spirit of God he sets a beautiful tone for the book of Romans of for our meditation for today and he describes how the faithful love of God makes all the difference. It makes all the difference in the world, and the faithful love of God makes all the difference in our lives.

The faithful love of God made all the difference for Paul. Paul was a Pharisee of Pharisee, in his former life he was well versed in the Scriptures, he knew the words of Moses and the Prophets well. And yet because of the spiritual blindness of unbelief and the stubbornness of a sinful heart, he could not see what was so clearly in front of him the whole time. He could not see Christ, even though Christ was there. In his amazing love God called Paul to faith. The voice of Jesus called out Paul's name and the Scriptures were opened to him, so that he could see Christ as the fulfillment, the very embodiment of the Scriptures. Now that he had been brought to faith Paul rejoiced in the faithfulness of God, the promises He made in the holy Scriptures, and in the promises of the coming Savior made through Moses and the prophets. This was all a great source of joy and comfort to him., now that he believed. Once an obvious enemy of God and Jesus Christ Paul was shown remarkable grace. His life was forever changed. Paul was forgiven and even given an important role to play in the spreading of this gospel of the eternal God. Long before Paul believed or was even born God had established this plan of salvation so that Paul and so many others could be saved and changed and set apart for God. What remarkable grace! What undeserved love! Oh, the faithful love of God!

Paul meant to share that comfort, those remarkable assurances with his audience in Rome and so he begins, "***Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—<sup>2</sup> the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures...*** The faithfulness of God was astounding. This was the gospel of God. Long before Paul's conversion, even before Jesus was born, God had established and promised a plan for the salvation of his people. Prophet after prophet, would give detail after glorious detail of the Savior's coming. The Scriptures testify to the faithfulness of God, and his gracious plan of salvation in Christ.

For our purposes, today, let us consider just a few of the details, the signs, the promises that were made and fulfilled on that first Christmas night. In Numbers 24, some 1500 years before the Magi from the east made their memorable trek across the desert, Moses speaks of a star that would come out of Jacob, and a scepter, a ruler will come from Israel. In 2 Samuel, long before Mary and Joseph made their trip to Bethlehem, the town of David, we hear that the Savior would be born from the line and house of David and God would establish his throne forever. 700 years before that first Christmas night, in a time back when the line of David was in peril, the prophet Isaiah speaks of an unthinkable sign, *the virgin will give birth to a son, and he will be called Immanuel*. Even after the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah are destroyed because of their unfaithfulness God remains faithful. The proud line of David had been cut down and yet from the stump of Jesse, a shoot would come forth, and from that seed of David, a Savior would come to graciously supply us sinners with the righteousness that we needed. "***The days are coming,***" declares the

**LORD, “when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. <sup>6</sup> In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness. (Jeremiah 23:5-6).** In his abundant goodness God would also make it clear that the coming Savior would be for both the people of Israel and for those outside this chosen nation. **Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy.... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace... The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this. (Isaiah 9)**

In his faithfulness, in his great zeal, in his great love for us, God would keep all his promises. Dating as far back as the Garden of Eden he promised the One who would save his people from their sins. A Savior who would come from the seed of the woman. He would become one of us. This is the good news of great joy that we celebrate every year around this time, however that’s not even half of the story, is it? This child born of Mary would be true man and at the same time also true God. And that divinity was not only put on display as the heavens lit up in bright array at his birth but also in the gentle light of Easter morning and the jarring glory of the empty tomb. The Savior that God promised, the Savior that we needed to defeat sin, to achieve perfection, to conquer death and the devil himself for us is Jesus Christ.

Paul describes Jesus our Savior in this way, **who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, <sup>4</sup> and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.** In one swift phrase Paul goes from Christmas to Easter and describes the good news of God that saves us. This is the gospel of God that the Scriptures foretold, and this message is all about Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ: those names, that are so familiar to us, are worth taking some time to contemplate. Paul gives special attention to the title of Christ. Christ means anointed one, chosen one. This is the Savior that was chosen. The holy one, born to Mary held by Joseph, is the Son of God, appointed from the beginning to be our Savior. And the name that was given to him was Jesus. Our Gospel lesson for today reminds us of the significance of this name that is so sweet, so familiar. On this day, so close to Christmas, as Paul repeats this precious name one may easily hear the words of the angel echo with holy significance. <sup>21</sup> **She will give birth to a son,”** the angel said to Joseph, **“and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”** - Matthew 1:21.

This is the good news that has been revealed to us, and through this gospel we are changed. We are daily renewed and refreshed in the good news that God came for us; that Jesus came to be our Savior, our sins are forgiven. We who were once lost and condemned creatures are covered by his grace. We are called to be his own. Once enemies of God, we belong to Christ. We are loved by God. We are called to be saints, God’s holy people, as we

are called from sinful rebellion to the obedience that comes from faith. Our lives are forever changed, as we are daily renewed to live for our God.

Lives forever changed by a miracle. Men, women, and children whose lives were headed in one direction and then their lives are suddenly turned around by a remarkable encounter, a fortunate series of events, or by a message that made a powerful impact on our hearts and minds and our lives. No, it isn't just the plot of another Christmas movie. This isn't just the description of some ancient believer. This is also a description of your life. This is the undeserved love that God shows to you. Your God, your Savior, your Emmanuel has come to you. Through the Holy Scriptures he has revealed his undeserved love for you in Christ and has called you to be his own. Through the glorious encounter at baptism and at the Supper, through the powerful message of the gospel, our hearts, our minds, our lives, are forever changed as God has called us to be his own and has gifted us with his forgiveness and undeserved love that gives us remarkable peace. We are enabled by his grace to leave behind lives of sin and instead live for our God. Blessed by his presence and his love we are empowered to live lives of service and love. What was true for Paul, what was true for those ancient saints in Rome, is true for us, the faithfulness of God makes all the difference.

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, go ahead and take a moment now to fast forward as you recall what is to come. Consider what your faithful God has done for you. As you prepare to bow before the manger look over Mary's shoulder and see the shadow of the cross and the joy of the empty tomb. As you prepare to kneel in wonder at the faithfulness of God in sending his only Son, trust and believe that God will keep his promise to come again to take you to the joys of heaven. As you prepare to sing with angels and worship in humble adoration with the shepherds take a moment here with Paul to marvel in the faithfulness of God. This is the one chosen and promised from the beginning to save you from your sins and to give you new life and everlasting life. This is the one who came just as promised. This is the one who was born for you. Who lived for you. Who died and rose again for you and me. And that good news changes us. It grants us forgiveness, give us peace, and calls us and motivates us to live for our God. This is the remarkable story that God makes true for us: Lives forever changed and blessed by the miracle of faith in Christ, lives blessed by the presence of our faithful God and Savior. The faithfulness of God makes all the difference as he greets us all in the same kind of lovely way, *to all of you 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. Amen.*