

# Good News and Its Glee

## A Prep Guide for Sessions 4

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Have you ever experienced delayed glee?

You scour every ad and test drive every model that interests you, but then, one day, you finally discover THE car you want to buy. Big moment...but inevitably glee is delayed: there's the two more hours in the dealership while they prep the car and you sign a stack of papers or electronic pages.

You start to feel the first intimations of dread at work and realize that you need to change jobs, play the field, land the interview, and then, finally, you get the long-anticipated phone call: "Congratulations! When can you start?" But next you have to play out the two weeks or three months that you've promised your present employer, not to mention the haggling over salary and benefits with the next one, before you actually get to begin your new job.

Or there's a gap between when you decide, "It's time to retire!" and that first Sunday night when you actually find yourself not setting a Monday morning alarm. Delayed glee.

The Letter to the Romans features delayed glee.

Anticipation rises when we first hear Paul's thesis statement of 1.16-17 announcing "good news" ahead, that is the "power of God for salvation" and will reveal "the righteousness of God." But then there follow thirteen whole paragraphs of increasing bad news – God's wrath revealed, a scathing indictment of moralist superiority, the Jewish people called on the carpet for failing with Moses' Law, "none righteous, not even one! Very dreary!

Then, the actual good news finally arrives in 3.21 – "BUT NOW (Nuni de), apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been manifested..." We hear of God's gift of rectification – that we've been made right apart from merit. The content is positive, it seems like we're home, but euphoria doesn't immediately set in. Paul puts this good news in dense legal and theological language about redemption and sacrifice and all sorts of technical terms, because he has T's to cross and I's to dot. As a Wesley-literate Methodist among you phrased it during Wednesday's after chat, "I know we've just heard the great good news of Paul's Gospel, but I'm not feeling my heart "strangely warmed." In fact, even the chapter on Abraham's faith feels like a part of the case Paul is making. It certainly doesn't summon for us Isaiah's memorable anticipation, "how lovely on the mountain are the feet of those who bring good news!" Many of you are still looking for the glee.

Friends, brace yourself for the joy of your salvation. I do have good news: with chapters 5 and 6 we begin to unwrap the gift of grace, reap the benefits of salvation, feel the magnitude of

Paul's Gospel as it reaches into our daily lives. We'll hear words like "peace" and "hope" and "love" and "rejoice" and "friends of God." Glee has been delayed, and, frankly, you and I are ready for some. But as my favorite chef puts it, sometimes "hunger is the best sauce!" Let's read!

## SHALOM

When big things need expression, adequate words can be hard to find. I'm guessing that Paul, a Hebrew-language-trained Jew writing in a commoner's colloquial version of the Greek language, faced considerable frustration when he wanted to communicate SHALOM! Most of you have heard a sermon or read a devotional or otherwise feasted on the expansive range of this large Hebrew word.

- ◇ SHALAM. The root concept shows up in Exodus 21—22 in the context of restitution and restoration. One Israelite has caused another material loss or physical harm, so the offender is commanded to "make things right" or "make full restitution" or "restore" the person to health.
- ◇ SHALOM. The word itself comes 'round in Genesis 43 when Joseph, still unrecognized by his brothers, asks after them. Each of the three bolded words or phrases below translates SHALOM. *"Then Joseph asked them about their **well-being**, and said, "Is your father **well**, the old man of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?" And they answered, "Your servant our father is **in good health**; he is still alive."* (NKJV 27-28)
- ◇ SHALOM. When the Jews of Jerusalem and Judaea found themselves exiled to Babylon, they were tempted to bunker down, keep to themselves, and wait out the indignity of their situation. But Jeremiah would have none of it. He wrote a letter exhorting them to "Multiply! Do not dwindle away! And work for the **peace and prosperity** (SHALOM) of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, for its **welfare** (SHALOM) will determine your **welfare** (SHALOM)."

For Paul to use the Greek word EIRENE and for us to settle for the English word PEACE – both of which usually denote a mere cessation of conflict – is a precipitous drop. In fact, I've always imagined that this frustration was behind Paul's decision. I finally to give SHALOM full expression in his famous and beautiful words on prayer in Philippians 4.6-7 – "Be anxious about nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication make your requests be made known to God, and **the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding**, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." For a Hebrew-speaking Jew, one-word translation of SHALOM must have felt like trying to funnel a cool clear lake through a tiny straw.

SHALOM is the first word that comes to mind when Paul tries to express the change that his gospel brings in a life.

*Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. <sup>2</sup> Because of our faith, Christ has brought*

*us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory. (Romans 5.1-2 -- New Living Translation = NLT)*

The large life change that we have been gifted – the true NUNI DE that we opened with in Session 3 – is a deep connection with God that IS our largest life. It's a newfound SHALOM, the restoration of God's intended wholeness for us. And we didn't even have to measure up to receive this gift. It's all God's doing through the faithfulness of Jesus. All we need to do is receive it in faith. Can you feel your heart warm?

### **The Place of Suffering**

My 17-year-old son Isaac has just finished navigating a highly pressurized college application season. The parent's job is support, encouragement, and the occasional alert that time is running out. But one of the joys of this season for me, as Isaac's dad, has been the privilege of being asked to read one or two of the required essays. In one, Isaac chronicles his experience being a member of Gen Z who has lived his whole life in a culture plagued by post-September-11-2001 wariness, social media carnage, epidemic school shootings, the most lethal pandemic in over a century, a return of overt racial strife, and what one Stanford scholar has called "fear and loathing across party lines." The circumstances in which Isaac and his peers have carved out a life have not been rosy or easy. As he describes this setting, Isaac confesses that he succumbed to a victimhood that spiraled his emotions and attitudes downward in his early teens. But then, with a prompt to describe how his study of Roman classical literature has mattered in his life, Isaac told of a turning point. Here's a paraphrase, "I read the Christian philosopher Boethius, who lived amid wretched circumstances during his life: imprisonment, invasions by attacking tribes, and a whole lot of other things that made life hard. But Boethius was happy. And in 'The Consolation of Philosophy,' he taught me that circumstances don't have to determine my experience. He taught me that I can decide to be happy, and I am happy."

Boethius comes from the school of the apostle Paul. You can imagine the joy it was for me to read of Isaac's happiness. But even more exciting for me were the tools he described in the essay for finding joy, whatever befalls. Those will last a lifetime, and Paul outlines a similar refusal to let circumstances squelch joy in his constructive attitude toward suffering in 5.3-5.

*We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. <sup>4</sup>And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. <sup>5</sup>And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.*

For Paul, the "grace in which we stand" from 5.2, "how dearly God loves us" in 5.5a, and the Holy Spirit's indwelling 5.5b become the equipment for letting suffering build character and, ultimately, hope. Now Paul and Boethius and Isaac are all playing for the same cosmic team, and so can we. Ironically, amid suffering, more glee!

### **Timely Help**

If Paul spelled out the legal categories for Christ's cross in 3.21-30, he now gets to the more human side of the gift – the part that has the hero save even villains during their villainy. Here's how he puts it.

*When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. <sup>7</sup> Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. <sup>8</sup> But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. <sup>9</sup> And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God's condemnation. <sup>10</sup> For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son. <sup>11</sup> So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God.*

This is grace fleshed out. The Savior's death was not mere martyrdom for a cause. It was much more personal than this. In the Latin of the Reformers, Jesus' death was "PRO NOBIS" – for us. It summons the language of the Nicene creed,

"For us men and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven,  
and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary,  
and became man.  
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate,  
he suffered death and was buried...

And Jesus did all this when we were not on our best behavior. Just as Luke's Jesus looks out at the madding crowd crying "Crucify him!" and said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," so here Jesus looks straight at our very worst selves and takes the bullet for us anyway. As another translation has it, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly." It's no wonder that now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship... [as] friends of God!

Is your heart warming yet?

### **The Two Adams**

In the latter half of chapter five, Paul moves back to a less personal, more cosmic and theological remove, as he compares Adam in Eden with Jesus in Jerusalem. I commend to you Harry Attridge and David Bartlett's interpretation of this section from their wonderful Yale Bible Study guide.

*When Paul had wrestled with the meaning of belief in resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:42-49, he had drawn a parallel between Adam and Christ, reflecting his fundamental conviction that in the Christ event God had done such a radical act of divine power that he had effected a new*

creation (cf. Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17). He returns to that notion now, highlighting the role of Sin in the first creation and its remedy in the second.

*This section of Romans has served as the foundation for much later theological speculation on the theme of “original sin,” understood to be a condition caused by Adam’s fall remedied by the sanctifying grace poured out by God in baptism. That theology and in particular the causal function of Adam’s sin was particularly reinforced by the Latin translation of the last clause in v. 12, which offered an overly literal rendition of a Greek prepositional phrase meaning “because all sinned” as “in whom all sinned.” Paul’s thought is less interested in causal relationships than later theology would be, although he does think that Adam’s deed provided a bad example for others to follow. He is more interested in a rhetorical move of setting up a typology or comparison (what the rhetoricians called a synkrisis), with the final aim of celebrating what God accomplished in Christ.*

*The other major concern of Paul’s argument here is not with the abstract questions of how sin originated or was transmitted, but with the relationship between sin and the Law. He begins with a brief echo of the story of the fall in Genesis, noting that through one man death and sin came into the world (v. 12), and these realities eventually affected all human beings, since all have sinned, a point that he had developed at length in the first three chapters. The concern with the Law immediately becomes apparent. Echoing a theme he had sketched in Gal 3:17-19, he notes that sin was a reality before the Law was given, which made clear what sin was. Having posited that Adam was a “type” of the one to come (v. 14), Paul then elaborates on the comparison between the first and the second Adam, concentrating on the difference between the two. The “gracious benefaction” far exceeded the transgression (v. 15). While judgment led to condemnation and death, the gift of grace leads to life sharing in the reign of Christ (v. 17-18). The next contrast is particularly interesting for understanding Paul’s notion of participation in the “faith” of Christ. Just as one man’s disobedience provided an example that led all to sin, the obedience of Jesus led to “many” being rendered “righteous/just” (v. 19). Although Paul believes that God objectively dealt with Sin through the death of Christ, the exemplary quality of the faith of Jesus is as important as the exemplary quality of the sinfulness of Adam. It is not simply by believing in him, but by sharing his fidelity that the faithful enjoy the results of his sacrifice.*

[This is a good time to remind you of the great resource that the Yale Bible Study on Romans is. It includes a video of Drs. Bartlett and Attridge’s conversational exchange on each section of the letter, their written study guide, and a few sermons or articles that they have included under “Resources.” To access the Romans home page, [CLICK HERE.](#)]

## **The Benefits of Baptism**

Christians have been entering faith communities or moving into deeper commitment within them through the celebration of baptism since the church began almost two thousand years ago. Over the course of those millennia, baptism has taken many forms, and different perspectives on it have evolved. There’s been debate about infant vs believer baptism, about

whether baptism ought to be enacted immediately upon belief or delayed 'til the death bed, about whether a second baptism is legitimate, and other points of contention. Whole new denominations have been spawned over these disagreements. But through it all, whether sprinkled or poured or immersed, the rite has lived on as a mark of belonging within the body of Christ.

The earliest Jesus people had options.

They could have gone John's way. John the Baptist, whose prophetic mission influenced the shape of Jesus' ministry, called people out to the Jordan to be cleansed. In effect, he set up an alternative way to get sins forgiven, and he did it away from the temple in Jerusalem. Beleaguered people flocked to him out in the wilderness. As Matthew has it, "People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River." When John describes it himself, he says, "I baptize you with water for repentance. "

John's baptism was a cleaning up of sorts that may reflect a connection to the purity washing rituals of the Dead Sea Schools community, also known as the Essenes. This Essene rite was another option for the early Christians: water for the purpose of purification.

We don't know exactly how the decision was made or by whom, but the Jesus people went another way. Rather than a washing off that would need to be repeated, as John and the Essenes practice, and as the sacrifices in the temple also were, Christian baptism was from the earliest days a one-time affair. It was believed to change everything, as it involved death to an old self and resurrection to a new self. The celebrant would walk the candidates out into the river and lower them one by one down into the water, as if into their grave; then, after time submerged, the celebrant raised them back out of the water, gasping. In the preparation for the event, the baptizands had been taught an exotic first post-baptismal word that came from Jesus' native Aramaic: "Abba!" "Father!" "Daddy!" In this dramatic moment, these new Christians entered a new family, with God as parent and all of the people on the shore as their new family, their brothers and sisters. When they walked out of the water, they donned a new white robe to symbolize their new life in Christ. It was literally a breathtaking moment!

This dramatic incorporation ritual lies in the background as Paul moves into our chapter 6. Here, he will draw on the common experience of the Roman churches and himself: all have been baptized.

To open the topic, Paul quotes the words of his critics, who have ridiculed his radical theology of unmerited salvation. "Well then, should we keep on sinning so that God can show us more and more of his wonderful grace?" As a reply, Paul chooses the strongest possible Greek negative: ME GENOITO – "May it never be!" Or in the more colloquial New Living Translation, "Of course not!" And to prove that he's serious he needs only to remind them what happened to all of them at baptism.

*Since we have died to sin, how can we continue to live in it? <sup>3</sup> Or have you forgotten that when we were joined with Christ Jesus in baptism, we joined him in his death? <sup>4</sup> For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives. (6.2-4)*

Here, Paul relives baptism with them – the death in a watery grave, the rising and gasp for fresh air into lungs. This ritual death to an old self and resurrection to a new one lie behind Paul’s argument for the rest of the chapter, as he literally fleshes out the impact of grace in a lived daily life. He continues...

*Since we have been united with him in his death, we will also be raised to life as he was. <sup>6</sup> We know that our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives. We are no longer slaves to sin. <sup>7</sup> For when we died with Christ we were set free from the power of sin. <sup>8</sup> And since we died with Christ, we know we will also live with him. (6.5-8)*

And so goes Paul logic, but it wasn’t just a rational structure. Elsewhere, he makes this very personal as he describes his whole life in these terms. “I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. And the life that I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loves me and delivered himself up for me.” (Galatians 2.20-21 NASB) He exhorts the Romans to follow his lead: “So you also should consider yourselves to be dead to the power of sin and alive to God through Christ Jesus.” (6.11)

The broad-strokes presentation of death to an old self and resurrected life lived with Christ serves on a macro, conceptual level. But left there, it doesn’t quite reach the arms and legs and torso and tongue that actually live in the world. So next Paul moves to the implications of this death and rising for how we conduct our bodily lives.

*Do not let sin control the way you live; do not give in to sinful desires. <sup>13</sup> Do not let any part of your body become an instrument of evil to serve sin. Instead, give yourselves completely to God, for you were dead, but now you have new life. So, use your whole body as an instrument to do what is right for the glory of God. (6.12-13)*

Notice here that sin has become a personality or a force. In fact, it almost should be capitalized in the text. This first happens in Romans for a brief moment in 3.9, where Paul reminds the Romans, “we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin...” There and again in chapter 6, sin has moved from being an act that humans commit to a force or power that inclines them to the act. We’ll get back to Paul’s theology of Sin as an actor and a power extensively when we reach chapter 7. For now, it’s worth marking, because Paul sees the Christians as free to choose either submission to sin or submission to God, presentation of our body’s members for the service of one or the other. This, although Paul will assure the Romans again that, “Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God’s grace.” (6.14)

Confused yet? The question whether and/or how grace and salvation fully free us from the power of sin is central in chapters six and seven. And it will all be intertwined with Paul's theology of the Law. Notice in verse 14 that Paul sees the new Christian freedom in a way that is directly related to our release from the aegis of Law ("you no longer live under the requirements of the law"); but the option to leave this glorious freedom and resubmit to law seems close at hand.

### **A Little Help from Bob Dylan**

In May of 1979, Bob Dylan traveled to the famous Muscle Shoals Sound Studios in Alabama to release (or "drop" in current lingo) a song that informs our reading of the last paragraphs of Romans 6. The lyrics sound like they've been spat out by Paul the apostle himself:

You may be an ambassador to England or France  
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance  
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world  
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed  
You're gonna have to serve somebody  
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord  
But you're gonna have to serve somebody  
(Gotta Serve Somebody; WRITTEN BY: BOB DYLAN)

In his inimitable whiny, mumbling voice, the brilliant Bob Dylan doesn't let one chorus suffice. In the single, this second stanza rings out seven full times. Dylan imagines every sort of person you can imagine, in all realms of life, to make his point unmistakable: there is no one exempt. In this world, we live as servants. The big choice in life is whom we choose to serve.

Paul's anthropology follows these same lines, as we see in 6.19.

*Previously, you let yourselves be slaves to impurity and lawlessness, which led ever deeper into sin. Now you must give yourselves to be slaves to righteous living so that you will become holy.*

For Paul, as for Dylan, humanity is every moment declaring allegiance and service to one power or another. Can you picture our bald, bearded, bowlegged apostle with headphones on singing along in Muscle Shoals?

### **A Summary**

Paul's final words of this chapter wrap up the argument by encapsulating it in a single paragraph that ends with one of his most famous lines.

*<sup>20</sup> When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the obligation to do right. <sup>21</sup> And what was the result? You are now ashamed of the things you used to do, things that end in eternal*



*doom. <sup>22</sup> But now you are free from the power of sin and have become slaves of God. Now you do those things that lead to holiness and result in eternal life. <sup>23</sup> For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.*

His final words will also be ours. But as we go out let's notice that the good news of which Paul is unashamed has turned out to have some spectacular consequences in our lives: Shalom with God, the power to turn suffering to hope in Christ's company, a reassurance that the love behind all this – the kind that dies for us at our worst moment – envelopes us all of our lives, and the assurance that through the gospel we have died to our old selves and to the power of sin itself. My dear and departed friend David Bartlett tried never to conjure and write a sermon to which he could not, somehow, append two final words: good news!

We got some good news today. Glee has come at last! Amen? Amen!!!

I hope to see you on Wednesday evening. In the meantime, to you, SHALOM!