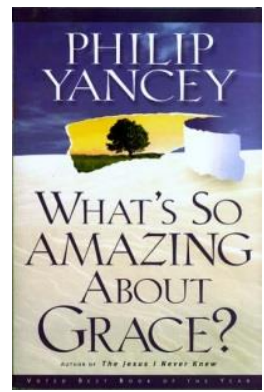


Gospel Manifesto: Romans 1:1-7



What's so amazing about Grace? God's grace.
That's the title of this book –
and it's a question which is really really good for us to think about.

It's something I remember talking to my mum about, she never really found a church or even Christian denomination she felt completely at home with, and she tried all sorts!

One day we were having a great chat about heaven and forgiveness, she said to me “yes, Grace, that's a word I hear a lot in Anglican churches, and I've never really understood it”

And I thought “oh no, that's *kinda* the most important thing about Christianity! Or thereabouts” But I also thought “this is great” because she really wanted to understand about something very important.

I can remember, more recently speaking to someone, with what I think of as a very ‘catholic’ upbringing. This person certainly *is* or wants to be a Christian, but they just think of God as being really mean. Always watching our failings, keeping count, and getting ready to dole out punishments.

And the book I lent to them, was this one – “What's so amazing about Grace” because if there's one thing to learn about what God is like – it's grace.

And actually, if I'd been more smart, I'd also have said: “read the book of the bible called Romans.” - Romans is about Grace!

I did a quick search last night on bible gateway – and the word Grace comes up more in Romans than any other bible book!

Romans famously says: “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely... by his... grace”

You'll know the song we're going to sing later:

*Amazing Grace how sweet the sound,
that saved a wretch like me,
I once was lost, but now I'm found,
was blind but now I see.*

Well, as we begin a new series in the book of Romans. Today I'm simply trying to give an introduction to the book:

My aims for this sermon are that at the end of it:

1st You'd want to know more about grace –

and therefore that you'd want to know romans in real detail - to get to understand it, so that you'd know God better, and his grace to you in Jesus Christ.

And, I have a few reasons why you should

Firstly: it could be for some of us, after Christmas time, that God has led us to want to know more about grace anyway! That's where it *should* lead us:

Every week in December, at our morning services we heard John 1 read, and this verse:

John 1:16-17

Out of his fullness [that's Jesus] we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

John says, Jesus came into the world and he brought **grace** – and it was really brilliant, this is what he came to bring – (it was something new somehow).

There had already been grace – but not like this – *the thing* which Jesus brings, which is worth getting excited about... is Grace.

So you might already have wanted to know more about grace, and if you hadn't, perhaps you're just a little bit more interested now, are you?

Well, **Reason 2** – Why you should want to know more about Grace, is just how important it is for us.

Understanding grace makes the difference between knowing that God loves people, and that God loves **you**!

Grace is like the engine in the Christian car, it gets us started **and** it is also what keeps us going, and moving forward in our Christian life.

Very quickly after Jesus died, "Grace and peace" had already become the standard Christian greeting (it was in v7)

God's grace took Paul from being an enemy of God, to writing in v1 "A servant of God". And God's grace does that for us too.

And as well as his apostleship, which I'll explain why later – Grace is the *one thing* Paul picks out which Jesus has shown him/given him in v5 – it's important.

So, how can you remember what grace means (apart from it being the most popular baby name in the UK for a girl in 2007, and staying in the top 20 for the last 15 years!)

GRACE: **G**od's **R**iches, **A**t **C**hrist's **E**xpense. That's God's riches – given to you! That's why it's exciting! At Christ's expense.

If that's too much, you could just remember it as God's undeserved love for you – I often say that.

But... it isn't a simple thing to get your head around and be done – it's what keeps you going, (all of us, no matter what age/stage)

Take a look at this verse in from later in the NT

Titus 2:11-12

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age

If the verse from John was a good verse for December, that is a good verse for January isn't it? As we begin to look ahead, it says that *grace* is what teaches us to say "no" to bad things. That's why grace is like the engine in the car – we can only move forward by grace. The grace of God teaches us to say no to ungodliness - We want that don't we? That's what our resolutions should find their power from, the engine of Grace.

It's there in the words of amazing Grace:

*Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis **grace** hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.*

I now want to move on to try to motivate you to get to know Romans – and show you why that is tied to grace.

So my first reason to get to know more about *Romans*:

Is the way God has used Romans in a special way throughout history.

It's been pretty amazing... let me tell you...

[Augustine](#), one of the most significant church fathers, in the year 386 became a Christian, converted from a fairly religious state of mind, to being a true Christian, reading a verse from Romans 13.

In the year 1516, [Martin Luther](#), who had grown up in fear of hell and aware of judgment, found in the book of Romans, a God of grace.

He said that a verse in chapter 1, (which we'll look at next week) "became to me a gateway into heaven" – he too was converted.

He went on, and his understanding of Grace, became the spark which lit a fire in the whole of Europe, and out of which protestant churches began to exist. And we, and all the church of England, are protestant churches. (and Romans had a huge part in that)

Then, more recently 1738, [John Wesley](#) was reading Romans and learning about how God changes the *heart* of a true Christian person – and he felt his heart strangely warmed, "I knew Christ died for me Christ loved me, He too was saved"

And he and his brother Charles became not only hugely significant for Methodist churches but also for the whole country as they sparked a revival of faith.

Those are just 3 men I picked from many, across the ages, for whom Romans was *personally* significant for, and I believe it can be for you too.

The words of Amazing grace speak about that *personal* change:

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.*

Here's my 2nd reason to get to know Romans.

Romans teaches doctrine. And particularly grace. This kinda links to my previous point: The reason Romans was so significant for Augustine, Luther and Wesley and so many others – well there's something different about Romans, different from other bits of the bible.

Romans is teaching **doctrine**, Christian doctrine. By which I mean, it's not re-telling historical events and how to understand them (like the gospels).

It's showing how things fit together, how to join the dots. Doctrine interprets and explains about Jesus, and about the whole Christian faith – Start to finish, who, how, why and so what? This is what you should believe: that's why this sermon series is entitled 'gospel manifesto'.

Now, being doctrine, makes Romans both *easier* and *harder* for us.

I'll explain first why it makes it easier for us.

Look down at your passage – v1

It says "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus"

Then look at v7

"To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people"

You see, Romans is a letter – written by Paul, to the people in Rome who are part of the church.

But being a letter doesn't make it easier, it's not unusual...

Have you ever had that experience of hearing someone on the phone, where you can only hear one side of the conversation?

You have to *work out* what the other person is saying, sometimes you get the gist, sometimes it's hard.

Yesterday my wife Sam was on the phone to a BT engineer person and I was unscrewing the phone socket – listening to her and trying to work out what to do with it, but I couldn't hear the engineer – I only had one side of the conversation!

Now most of the NT letters are one half of a communication. Take the very next book say, 1 Corinthians, Paul is replying to a letter from the Corinthians, and we have just one side of the conversation.

But with Romans <"can we have our map up"> Paul has never been to the church in Rome. He's in Greece, heading first to Jerusalem with some gifts of money, then plans to come go on to Spain, stopping at Rome on the way, hoping for some help and financial support.

So he's never been there, and if you look down at your passage again – that's why in v2-6 (unusually) he *introduces* himself. Instead of just saying "Paul, to the church in Rome" he says a bit about himself, that Jesus appointed him as an apostle (that is – Jesus gave him a job), and gave him v5 – both grace and apostleship.

Because Romans is doctrine, because this letter isn't a conversation, it's more general, it's an explanation and an announcement. That makes it easier to understand.

It's more closely *to* us, we're not in Rome but in Stevenage, it's coming up to 2000 years later, but the letter is general, teaching Christian doctrine – which is for us just the same as them. It's easier...

Now, I say that, but doctrine can also be **harder**, a bit more tricky to understand, and get your head around.

It can be technical. It can have a lot of explaining, and lots of logical consequence. Like I said, it's join the dots – and if you miss a dot you can get the wrong picture.

Let me show you what I mean – You may have noticed even whilst it was read – and you only need to look at v2-4, there are careful logical statements:

Paul was set apart for the gospel of God, *What gospel?*

Well v2 the one promised beforehand. *How?*

In the scriptures, v2 God spoke already by the prophets, and it was written down.

What is the gospel all about?

V3 "his Son" – that's Jesus. *What are we to think of him?*

V3 Particularly for the Jews to notice, in a fleshy human sort of way he's descended from king David. And v4 particularly for the gentiles to notice (that's everyone else) we know he was the son of God because the Holy Spirit raised him from the dead – and he's now seated on the throne of heaven.

It's a long, complicated sentence with ideas stringed together – it's wonderful(!) but it's like join the dots. The reason he says it, is so we know Paul believes in Jesus, he's authentic, he teaches the real deal - *and* it's this real, promised and powerful Jesus, who (v5) gave Paul grace and apostleship.

So, as doctrine, Romans can be tricky.

But it is important, and it's worth it – Dave and I will work really hard first to understand it, and also to figure out how explain it bit by bit – and we won't mind at all if you come to us

after and ask a question, even something very obvious like “Dan I listened really hard to your sermon today and I know it was about Grace, but what is that exactly?”

We’re looking at Romans in two sections. The next 10 or so weeks will be in ch 1-8, which are all about God’s grace to us.

Then in the autumn, we’ll look at the rest, where ch 9-11 are about God’s sovereign plan, and 12-16 are about really practical everyday-life consequences for us, of all this doctrine.

But, if you’re nervous doctrine can be harder... let me say finally:

The 3rd Reason to know more about Romans:

Is that the doctrine it teaches is **foundational**.

Paul is explaining *what really matters* – what we must believe.

This isn’t take-it-or-leave-it stuff, it’s essential foundations.

For the people in Rome, the particular situation they found themselves in, meant they had to navigate through some difficult decisions and things they held different opinions on.

I’ll explain in just a second, but the point is:

Paul doesn’t give them exact instructions or specifics, instead he gives them the big picture, and the answer to the question “What really matters?”

And what does really matter? God’s grace.

And guess what... it’s the same for us!

So Romans was written in the year 57, the Roman empire was big and really strong. Rome was a lively capital, over 1 million people lived there, both rich and poor, a real mix.

And there was a mix in the church, there were Christians from a Jewish background, and those from a gentile (non-Jewish) background.

That’s why we had our other reading from Acts – it said that at the first Pentecost there are “visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts)”

But, something interesting had happened in the church. 8 years previously, the Roman Emperor chucked all the ethnically Jewish people out of Rome.

That meant that probably slightly over half the church had to leave, suddenly!

Imagine if that happened to us(!) suddenly, say, the oldest half of our church had to leave!

So, the church in Rome, now about half the size, started to do things in a less Jewish way, and actually, it thrived and grew.

After a few years passed, most of the Jews came back. They found things were very similar, but different.

Imagine how it might be if the youngsters were running our church, they began to do things a little differently, and then it grew and thrived.

Then after a few years most of the older folks returned.

There might be some discussions, even conflict?

About the music, what activities we do, how we spend money, and how things should be done – and most importantly – why?

Paul is writing into that sort of situation, and he is explaining “What really matters”

He doesn't say, "play two Jewish songs and two new ones". "The music should be with drums" or not. He doesn't know them, it's not specific like that.

It's general: He knows it's strong, shared foundations that will help them, he wants them together to know, and all agree on "What really matters"

That way they can begin to work it out together.

Why should that mean we want to know Romans better –

This is foundational stuff, foundational for us all! And actually like any really strong foundation, it's deep – so it's firm.

That's why Martin Luther, who I mentioned earlier, said "every Christian should know every word of it, by heart, and should occupy themselves with it, every day"

That's why, William Tyndale, the first man to translate the bible into English, which was actually before the KJV, wrote:

"Romans is a light and a way into the whole of the bible. Learn it by heart! And be sure, that the more you study it, the easier it is, and the more you chew on it, the more sweet it is!"

When he says "The light and key to the bible" – what he means is, its teaching explains Christian doctrine, and it's foundational.

So...

There are probably only a few of us who know how a car engine really works, who could take one apart and put it together again – most of us just pay someone else to do that.

But it's not ok for only a few of us to know how the Christian engine works – because only you and God look after your engine.

God's grace

Pray:

Heavenly Father, it's your grace which calls us to the obedience of faith, for your name's sake. We want to know you more and walk more closely with you this year.

We are weak – we need your power and we need to know your grace better and better, which teaches us to live how you want.

Give us fuel for that engine of grace as we study the book of Romans we pray. Give us the desire to grasp it's truths, to study and learn. Teach us new things, refresh what we know with more depth over the next few weeks.

That we would love your son more, and glorify you through him.