

Introduction

Every year I'm responsible for writing our Christmas letter. We design a postcard with a cute picture of our family, tuck in the letter, place a holiday stamp on it, and send it off to family and friends across the county. It's an annual tradition for so many people. I'll just admit it: I don't always like doing it. First, it's an incredibly busy time, and a Christmas letter is yet one more thing to get done. Second, we need to sort through all our random pictures on Google photos to find the few that actually turned out well. Third, we're dependent on a local store to print our cards, and this year they were backlogged, swamped, and late. Fourth, I know that, deep down, my life is not quite as pretty as I make it sound. I share all the good news from our family—the blessings that occur at church, the joy that fills our home, the excitement that accompanies our vacations—but the letter is selectively edited. When I felt sad about my mom's death, I didn't want to include that in my letter. When I felt overwhelmed as a parent, I didn't want to include that in my letter. When I felt anxious about what's happening in the news, I didn't want to include that in my letter. Every year, an accurate Christmas letter would include bad news as well as good news. That bad news either weighs us down, or we try to pretend it will just go away. But it's still there, every year. Amid all the bad news that's due to the stress and sin in our lives, it's easy to forget how the good news impacts our entire lives.

That's why we need to read the opening of the apostle Paul's letter to the Christians at Rome today. If Paul were going to write a short and sweet opening to his letter, he would have said something like this, "Paul, to the Christians in Rome, greetings." But he didn't. This opening is the longest and most extensive opening of all Paul's epistles—by a longshot. As we progress through it, Paul can't help but get carried away in talking about the gospel of God. The gospel of God is the good news that originates in God, that he proclaims, that he accomplishes, and that he shares. To Paul, this good news is what life is all about, and so this Christmas season can rightly be a season of good news. So we open Paul's letter to the Romans and discover:

A Christmas Letter Filled with Good News

*good news from the past ... good news of Jesus Christ
good news for the world ... good news in your hearts*

Good News from the Past

Every Christmas letter we receive looks back on the past year—the trips we made and the things we accomplished. Same with Paul's letter: he looks back on the past. First, Paul shares good news from the past. ... ***the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures*** ... As Paul traveled around the Mediterranean world and shared the message of Christianity, some people could have assumed that Paul was starting a new religion and sharing a new message. That was not the case at all! This good news was already promised from the very beginning of the Old Testament. For example, in Genesis 3, God promised Eve that one of her descendants would come and crush the devil's head. In Genesis 12, God promised Abraham that through one of his descendants all nations on earth would be blessed. In Genesis 49, God promised Judah that a king's scepter would never depart from his tribe. In 2 Samuel 7, God promised King David that one of his descendants would rule forever. In Isaiah 7, as we heard today, God promised King Ahaz that this royal son would be born of a virgin. Paul is simply

continuing the prophetic message that has been around for centuries by proclaiming how all these prophecies find their fulfillment in Christ.

Today you can open up God's Christmas letter to you, and it's filled with good news from the past. In fact, it's the oldest news you could ever hear. From all eternity, God had you in mind. Long ago, before the creation of the world, he crafted this plan that would send Jesus into this world. Over the centuries, he made promise after promise, and he kept every single one. The plan of salvation gradually unfolded until the time when the angel appeared to Mary and Joseph and announced that Jesus would be born. All this shows that what God promises, he fulfills. What God says he will do, he does. What God plans on doing, he accomplishes. God's Christmas letter to you assures you that you can trust him in your life.

Good News of Jesus Christ

Every Christmas letter we receive focuses on the people in our lives—friends and relatives, children and grandchildren. Same with Paul's letter: he focuses on a person. Second, Paul shares good news of Jesus Christ. ... *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* ... What makes the good news so good is that it is all about Jesus Christ. What follows is a rich doctrinal passage about the person and work of Christ. In Paul's writings, he often contrasts the flesh and the Spirit as two eras. The flesh refers to the era of this lower, earthly life; the Spirit refers to the era of that higher spiritual life. What exalts us from the era of this lower, earthly life to the higher, spiritual life is the great event of salvation history, Jesus' resurrection. Let's break that down in more simple terms. In his earthly life, Jesus was a descendant of David. He was born of Mary, a descendant of David, and adopted by Joseph, a descendant of David. He was born in Bethlehem, David's own hometown where he was called out from tending the sheep to be anointed king of Israel. By being from David's line, Jesus could fulfill those ancient promises of Isaiah that a coming king would come from David's line. But as important as that was, that's not all. In his resurrection, Jesus was appointed the Son of God. Jesus always was the Son of God from all eternity, but at his resurrection he was publicly and powerfully declared to be God's Son. The empty tomb gave proof beyond the shadow of a doubt—Jesus is far more than just an earthly descendant of King David; he is the Lord of heaven and earth. Paul shows that who Jesus is, the Son of David and the Son of God, is directly related to what he came to do.

Today you can open up God's Christmas letter to you, and it's filled with good news of Jesus Christ. First, he is a descendant of David, which means that he is the promised Messiah and rightful King of Israel. But it means more! He was descended from a long line of lousy kings like Ahaz, sinful people who made messes of things. He has entered our messed up world to experience all the messes of our lives. He condescends to our sinful world to be one of us. Second, he is the Son of God, which means that he is our Lord. But it means more! He was ushered from this era of weakness to an era of power. He will bring you from this era of weakness to an era of power. He will lead you from a lowly birth through a painful death to a glorious future. God's Christmas letter to you assures you that, because of what Jesus Christ has done, your life is filled with good news.

Good News for the World

Every Christmas letter we receive looks out at the world—the events in our society and the headlines in our news. Same with Paul's letter: he focuses on the world. Third, Paul shares

good news for the world. ... ***Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake. And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.*** ... Paul was not a typical apostle. He wanted to round up Christians and throw them in prison. When he went to Damascus to find Christians there to imprison, God surprisingly transformed him from a persecutor to a proclaimer. When Peter and the other disciples were focusing on proclaiming the gospel to the Jews, Paul was tasked with proclaiming the gospel to the Gentiles. This surprising candidate went on to be the great global missionary of the early church. His mission was to travel around the Mediterranean world to places we now know as Syria, Turkey, and Greece to call people to faith through the gospel and to show how the gospel will then shape all their lives. His mission even included these Christians at Rome, a cosmopolitan city and the capital of the empire, a place he would eventually reach near the end of his life. Paul shows who this good news is meant for: every person in the world.

Today you can open up God's Christmas letter to you, and it's filled with good news for the world. No matter if you are black or white, Hispanic or Asian, this good news is for you. It's meant for every background, every culture, and every race. No matter how far your children have drifted from church, no matter how much you talk to your neighbors, no matter how close you are to your friends, this good news is for them too. There is no better time of the year for you individually to pick up a Christmas invitation in Welcome Center and invite all those people to hear this good news. There is no better time of the year for us collectively as a church body to share that good news with the world. God's Christmas letter to you assures you that this good news is for everyone.

Good News In Your Hearts

Every Christmas letter we receive warms our hearts—by sharing the love in our families and by strengthening the bonds among our friends. Same with Paul's letter: he wants to warm our hearts. Fourth, Paul shares good news in your hearts. ... ***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.*** After a long elaboration on the writer of this letter—Paul, a servant of the gospel of God—Paul finally mentions his recipients. He would not meet these people in Rome for a couple of years, but he can still address them as those who are “loved by God” and “saints.” He can address them in such tender terms because of their shared bond of faith that is worked by the good news of Jesus Christ. After mentioning the writer and the recipients of the letter, Paul finally gets to his greeting. “Grace” was a common greeting in the Greek-speaking world, which would've been relevant to the Gentiles in the Roman congregation. “Peace” was a common greeting in the Hebrew-speaking world, which would've been relevant to the Jews in the Roman congregation. But Paul infuses these secular greetings with a Christian character. Grace refers to God's undeserved love, and it shows that God will love you no matter what. Peace is the result of God's grace, and it sets our hearts at rest and repairs relationships between people. Paul shows the ultimate goal of this good news: it makes its way deep in our hearts and changes our lives.

Today you can open up God's Christmas letter to you, and it's filled with good news in your hearts. This Christmas season, I hope that your heart will be touched by the love of family and the bonds of friendship. But no one can ever love you more than God can. He will love you when you are naughty and when you are nice. He will love you despite your sin and selfishness, your resentment and your regrets. He will love you no matter what. Once you know and experience that love deep in your hearts, it instills a deep peace in your hearts. Now there is no

point to shake your fist at God, because you know that the difficulties of the past year do not come from an angry overlord but a loving Father. There is no point to be fearful before him, because you know that all the conflict between you two has ceased. There is no point to dwell on the conflicts in your relationships, because you know that God's peace towards you moves you to work toward peace with others. God's Christmas letter to you assures you that there is no better greeting to hear than grace and peace.

Conclusion

December is a packed month for the USPS, and sometimes Christmas letters get delivered to the wrong address. It's awkward to receive someone else's mail, and it's frustrating when your own mail gets delayed. But here it's a good thing. Almost two thousand years ago, Paul addressed this letter to the Romans and sent it off. Since it's been preserved in the Bible, it's as if this letter to the Romans has been rerouted and delivered to your mailbox. In essence, we're reading other people's mail. Like the many other Christmas letters we receive, this letter could have talked about the millions of things going on in our lives, but from the very beginning, it's all about one thing: the good news of God. There's always so many distractions during the holiday season, and during this upcoming week it's easy to run around frantically, as we get ready to clean our homes for visitors, as we get ready to prepare a Christmas dinner, as we get ready to travel to see family. No wonder these final days can feel like bad news. So open God's Christmas letter to you, a letter that will fill your life with good news. Amen.