

Romans: The Good News of God

The Greatest Letter Ever Written

Romans 1:1-7

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The Greatest Letter Ever Written

Scripture

He was pacing back and forth, thoughtful and expectant. Physically, he was not an impressive man (see for example 2 Corinthians 10:10; Galatians 4:14). He had scars and blemishes all over his body from his various beatings and stonings. His body was weathered and leathered by many years of hardship and suffering (2 Corinthians 11:23-27). But whatever his physical blemishes may have been, he exuded joy and confidence and purpose.

“Where is he?” he asked himself out loud.

As if on cue, there was a sharp knock at the door.

“Ah! Tertius!” he greeted the visitor, “Come in. It’s good to see you! Thank you for coming today.”

After a few pleasantries were exchanged, the two men walked to the study in the large home of Gaius of Corinth. Tertius sat down at the little writing desk and prepared himself for the dictation that he was about to receive.

“I’m ready whenever you are,” he said.

The older man, pacing the floor once again, although more slowly and deliberately now, began to speak while Tertius wrote down what he said:

¹ Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—² the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures ³ regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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. ⁶ And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

⁷ 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. (Romans 1:1-7)

And so began the greatest letter ever written.

Introduction

Today, I am starting a new sermon series on Romans.

It is my intention to preach through Paul's entire letter to the Romans week by week, chapter by chapter, verse by verse, and even word by word, as the situation warrants.

It seems to me that this approach is the most useful in helping us understand the thrust and focus and purpose of God's inspired and authoritative word. In this respect I am following the example of Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse, the long-time pastor during the middle of the 20th century of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, who made the following observation of his method of study of the letter to the Romans:

I believe that the only way to understand any given passage in the word of God is to take the whole Bible and place the point of it, like an inverted pyramid on that passage, so that the weight of the entire word rests upon a single verse, or, indeed, a single word. Thus I have not called this volume and the ones to follow a commentary, but rather expositions of the word of God; expositions which take as their point of departure the book of Romans and range through the whole of the Bible in order to bring all of the correlated truth of the word to bear on each line and word of the epistle.¹

Because of this approach, which I plan to adopt for my study in this series, I do not know how fast we will make our way

¹ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Man's Ruin*, vol. 1 of *Exposition of Bible Doctrines, Taking the Epistle of Romans as a Point of Departure* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952), iii-iv.

through this letter to the Romans. However, I expect to preach approximately 100 sermons on “Romans: The Good News of God.”

I also want to be sensitive to the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst. I am reminded of what Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the great Welsh preacher in London who preached at about the same time as Dr. Barnhouse, said when he began preaching through the letter to the Romans. He said:

Furthermore, I do not announce a programme, and for this reason, that when you are studying the word of God you never know exactly when you are going to end. At least, I have a very profound feeling that such should be the case, believing, as we do, in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. We know from experience that he suddenly comes upon us—he illumines the mind and moves the heart—and I believe that any man who expounds the Scripture should always be open to the influences of the Holy Ghost. That is why some of us do not broadcast sermons [i.e. announce programs], because we find it difficult to reconcile ourselves to a time-limit in these matters.²

Lesson

With that in mind, let us begin our lesson for today. Today, I simply want to introduce you to Paul’s letter to the Romans. And I want to do so by asking the following questions:

1. What has been the impact of the letter to the Romans?
2. What prompted the letter to the Romans?
3. What is the content of the letter to the Romans?
4. What is the purpose of the letter to the Romans?

I. What Has Been the Impact of the Letter to the Romans?

First, then, what has been the impact of the letter to the Romans?

² D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 1, The Gospel of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 1-2.

All of us want our lives to count for something. We feel that in one way or another we want to make an impact in our respective callings. Whether Christian or non-Christian, we want our lives to make a difference somewhere.

Apart from the Lord Jesus Christ, no-one has, in my estimation, made a more significant impact on the world than the apostle Paul. And specifically, Paul's letter to the Romans has been the most widely influential document ever written.

Several notable church leaders have testified, throughout the centuries, to the impact which the letter to the Romans has made on their lives. In some cases, the letter to the Romans was the means of their conversion. Let me mention just three of them, in order to encourage us to take our study of Romans seriously.

A. *Augustine of Hippo*

Aurelius Augustinus, known to the world as Augustine of Hippo, or simply as St. Augustine, destined to become the greatest Latin Father of the Early Church, was born on a small farm in what is now Algeria, North Africa.

During his turbulent youth he was both a slave of his sexual passions and the object of his mother Monica's prayers.

As a teacher of literature and rhetoric he moved successively to Carthage, Rome, and then Milan, where he came under the sound of Bishop Ambrose's preaching.

It was there during the summer of 386 AD, when he was thirty-two years old, that he went out into the garden of his home to seek peace and quiet.

"The tumult of my heart took me out into the garden," he wrote later in his *Confessions*, "where no-one could interfere with the burning struggle with myself in which I was engaged. . . . I was twisting and turning my chains. . . . I threw myself down somehow under a certain fig tree, and let my tears flow freely."

Continuing, he wrote:

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Suddenly I heard a voice from the nearby house chanting as if it might be a boy or a girl. . . saying and repeating over and over again, “Pick up and read, pick up and read.” . . . I interpreted it solely as a divine command to me to open the book and read the first chapter I might find. . . . So I hurried back to the place where. . . I had put down the book of the apostle [Paul to the Romans] when I got up. I seized it, opened it and in silence read the first passage on which my eye lit: “Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature” (Romans 13:13-14). I neither wished nor needed to read further. At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled.³

Upon reading that short text from Romans, Augustine was converted, and went on to become one of the Church’s most outstanding leaders and theologians.

B. Martin Luther

Over a thousand years later, in 1515, another professor was overtaken by a similar spiritual crisis.

Like everybody else in medieval Christendom, Martin Luther had been brought up to fear of God, death, judgment and hell. And because it was thought that the surest way to gain heaven was to become a monk, in 1505 at the age of twenty-one, he entered the Augustinian cloister at Erfuhrt, where he prayed and fasted, sometimes for days on end, and adopted other extreme austerities.

“I was a good monk,” he wrote later. “If ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, it was I.”⁴

One biographer wrote that “Luther probed every resource of contemporary Catholicism for assuaging the anguish of a spirit

³ Augustine, a new translation by Henry Chadwick, *Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), Book VIII, 19-29, 146-153.

⁴ Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1951), 45.

alienated from God.”⁵ But nothing pacified his tormented conscience until, having been appointed Professor of Bible at Wittenberg University, he studied and expounded first the Psalms (1513-1515) and then Romans (1515-1516).

At first he was angry with God, he later confessed, because God seemed to him more a terrifying judge than a merciful savior. Where might he find a gracious God?

While studying Romans, Luther pondered the meaning of Romans 1:17 where it says that “in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed.” Luther tells us how his dilemma was resolved:

I had greatly longed to understand Paul’s letter to the Romans, and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, “the righteousness of God,” because I took it to mean that righteousness whereby God is righteous and acts righteously in punishing the unrighteous. . . . Night and day I pondered until. . . I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby, through grace and sheer mercy, he justifies us by faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before “the righteousness of God” had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gateway into heaven.⁶

God again used the letter to the Romans to convert Luther who became the lightning rod for the Protestant Reformation.

C. *John Wesley*

Some 200 years later, it was Luther’s own God-given insight into the truth of the good news of God which led to the similar illumination of John Wesley.

His younger brother Charles, with some Oxford friends, had founded what came to be nicknamed “the Holy Club,” and in No-

⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁶ Barend Klaas Kuiper, *Martin Luther: The Formative Years* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1933), 198-208.

vember 1729 John joined it and soon became its acknowledged leader. Its members engaged in sacred studies, self-examination, public and private religious exercises, and philanthropic activities, apparently hoping to earn salvation by such good works.

In 1735 John and Charles Wesley sailed for Georgia as chaplains to the settlers and missionaries to the American Indians. Two years later they returned profoundly disillusioned, which was mitigated only by their admiration for the piety and faith of some Moravians on board their ship. During a violent Atlantic storm encountered on their passage from America to England, the Wesleys were terrified while the Moravians calmly sang and prayed to God.

Then, on May 24, 1738, during a Moravian meeting at Aldersgate Street, London, to which John Wesley had gone “very unwillingly,” he turned from self-confidence to faith in Christ. Somebody was reading Martin Luther’s preface to his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, and that is what helped Wesley understand and believe the good news of God. Wesley wrote in his journal:

About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.⁷

God used the reading of Luther’s preface to Romans to convert John Wesley, and the influence of Wesley’s ministry is felt to this very day around the world.

I could go on with many such similar stories about how the letter to the Romans has impacted men and women throughout the centuries.

⁷ *John Wesley’s Journal* from the entry for May 24, 1738.

But my point is simply this: the letter to the Romans is arguably the most influential document ever written. And for that reason alone, it is worthy of our study.

II. What Prompted the Letter to the Romans?

Second, what prompted the letter to the Romans?

The apostle Paul spent ten years from 47 AD to 57 AD in intensive evangelization of the territories bordering on the Aegean Sea in what is today Greece and Turkey. During those years he concentrated in succession on the Roman provinces of Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia and Asia. Along the main roads of these provinces and in their principal cities Paul preached the gospel and planted churches. Paul took with proper seriousness his commission as Christ's apostle to the Gentiles, and he might well have contemplated with grateful praise not what he had done but what Christ had done through him.

Churches had been planted in Iconium, Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth and Ephesus. The churches in many other cities in those four provinces could be left under the care of their spiritual leaders and Elders, under the overruling direction of the Holy Spirit.

Even though the apostle Paul had completed three grueling missionary journeys during the ten years from 47 AD to 57 AD, his task was by no means finished.

During the winter of 56-57 AD, while on the last leg of his third (and final) missionary journey, which Paul spent in Corinth at the home of his friend and convert Gaius, he looked forward (with some misgivings) to a visit which had to be paid to Jerusalem in the immediate future. Paul had to present to the Elders of the Jerusalem church a gift of money which he had been collecting for some years among his Gentile converts, a gift which he hoped would strengthen the bonds between the mother church in Jerusalem and the churches of the Gentiles in the Roman provinces.

When that business would be concluded, Paul looked forward to the launching of a plan which had been taking shape in his mind over the past few years. With the conclusion of his missionary work in the Aegean lands, he dreamed of new fields to conquer for Jesus Christ.

In making the choice of a new sphere of activity, he determined to go on being a church planting pioneer. He would not settle down in any place where the gospel had already been proclaimed. He would not build on “someone else’s foundation” (Romans 15:20).

And so his choice fell upon Spain, the oldest Roman province in the west and the chief bastion of Roman civilization in those parts.

But a journey to Spain would also afford him the opportunity of gratifying a long-standing ambition—to see Rome! Although Paul was a Roman citizen by birth (Acts 22:28), he had never seen the city whose citizen he was. How wonderful it would be to visit Rome, and spend some time there!

And all the more wonderful because there was a church in Rome, and many Christians whom Paul had met elsewhere in his travels were now residents in Rome and members of that church. The very fact that the gospel had reached Rome long before Paul himself, ruled Rome out as a place where he would settle for pioneer evangelism and church planting.

Although he intended to keep traveling on to Spain for pioneer evangelism and church planting there, he nevertheless wanted to spend time in Rome with the Christians, not only to be encouraged by their faith but, more importantly, to address some of the concerns he had for the health of that church.

Not knowing how long it might be before he actually got to visit the church in Rome, Paul decided to write a letter to them while he was waiting in Corinth. During the spring of 57 AD, therefore, he dictated to his friend Tertius—a Christian secretary perhaps placed at his disposal by his host Gaius—a letter destined

for the Roman Christians, which has come to be known as “Paul’s letter to the Romans.”

III. What Is the Content of the Letter to the Romans?

Third, what is the content of the letter to the Romans?

Paul’s letter to the Romans concerns the gospel, the good news of God. At the conclusion of the letter Paul writes, “Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel” (16:25a), indicating that the gospel—the good news of God—is the primary and overarching theme of his letter.

Clues to main themes can be found in the opening greeting of Romans 1:1-7, and we shall see these themes constantly fleshed out throughout the entire letter. Paul indicates that the good news of God is:

1. from God (1:1-4; cf. 16:25),
2. about Jesus (1:3; cf. 16:25),
3. promised in the Old Testament (1:2; cf. 16:25-26),
4. for all nations (1:5b, 6; cf. 16:26), which
5. produces the obedience of faith (1:5c; cf. 16:26), and
6. glorifies God (1:5a; cf. 16:27).

Paul’s letter to the Romans speaks to us today just as powerfully as it did in the first century. It speaks to us about sin. It speaks to us about how to live in a right relationship to God. It teaches us how to relate to one another. It speaks to us about unity and about truth. It helps us understand how to resolve differences among ourselves. It informs us about our relationship to the government. It acquaints us with grace. But most of all, it profoundly brings God himself to us.

IV. What Is the Purpose of the Letter to the Romans?

And finally, what is the purpose of the letter to the Romans?

Why did Paul write the letter to the Romans? Why did he write it at this time? And most of all, why did he write what he actually wrote?

Paul could have simply sent a brief note preparing them for his intended visit and request their support for his missionary trip to Spain. It seems strange that Paul should write such a long letter with such a detailed explanation of the gospel to those whom he acknowledged as strong in the faith (1:8).

Commentators have suggested the following reasons for Paul's letter to the Romans:

- that he was defending himself against slander by fully explaining what he was really teaching (cf. 3:8), or
- that he was sending a thorough, written statement of the gospel to the most strategic city in the world so that if he was killed in Jerusalem (15:31), the Roman Christians would continue the work of spreading the gospel, or
- that he was giving the Romans a summary of his teaching so that they could make a properly informed decision about adopting him as their missionary (15:24), or
- that his purpose was to foster unity between the Jews and Gentiles in the Roman church (chapters 14-15).

However, Paul tells us why he wrote this letter, and I don't believe that any of the above reasons is the primary reason. As we read through the letter we notice that although there were outstanding strengths and opportunities in the Roman church, there were also potential weaknesses and threats.

On the one hand, Paul commended the church for their faith and obedience that was being reported all over the world. Paul said in Romans 1:8, "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world." And in Romans 16:19a he said, "Everyone has heard about your obedience." What a wonderful commendation!

But, on the other hand, Paul was concerned about the danger that was invading the apparently strong and healthy church in Rome. False teaching was beginning to divide the church. Paul said in Romans 16:17, “I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.”

Furthermore, Paul was concerned about the naiveté of the Roman Christians concerning false teachers. He continued in Romans 16:18-19, “For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people. Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I am full of joy over you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil.”

And so, what these faithful and obedient Christians needed, then, to arm themselves against the subtle and encroaching false teaching, was a solid review of the good news of God. That is why Paul wrote the letter to the Romans. He wanted to arm them with the good news of God so that they could identify and oppose false teaching *and* so that they could continue to grow in spiritual maturity. For Paul, these were life and death issues!

Paul was genuinely concerned for his readers. He prayed constantly for them (1:9-10) and had been “longing for many years” to see them and enjoy their fellowship (15:23, 32). He wrote to make sure that they would go on in “the obedience that comes from faith” (1:5).

But Paul was even more concerned, however, for the glory of God. He said in the final verse of the letter, “To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen” (16:27), and in Romans 11:36 he said, “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.” You see, Paul’s goals were God-centered and not man-centered.

A man-centered, self-centered “gospel” leads to poverty of soul. It is important to get this perspective clear now and keep it throughout our study of this letter. Paul wanted his readers to rest confidently and securely on the God-glorifying, life-transforming

gospel of God. He knew that anything else ultimately weakens and destroys our communion with God through Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Let me close with a brief comment about the costs and benefits of studying Romans.

A. *The Costs of Studying Romans*

The sheer length of the letter to the Romans will cost us time and effort in trying to understand and apply it to ourselves.

However, studying Romans properly will cost us much more than that. If chapters 15 and 16 are anything to go by, the “obedience of faith” will involve hard work, prayer, getting along with other people, serving them, sharing our wealth with them, and supporting missionaries. For some it may even mean danger and imprisonment. It will certainly mean we have to listen to bold words and stop listening to smooth-talking flatterers. Studying Romans won’t always be comfortable.

B. *The Benefits of Studying Romans*

But the benefits of studying Romans, however, far outweigh the costs.

The first key benefit of studying Romans will be *to us*. We will be strengthened in the faith which saves and gives eternal life (1:16-17; 16:25). Trusting and obeying the message of Romans is a life and death issue for us. Martyn Luther said:

This epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament and the very purest gospel, and is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul. It can never be read or

pondered too much, and the more it is dealt with the more precious it becomes, and the better it tastes.⁸

The second key benefit of studying Romans will be *to others*. We will share Paul's confidence in the gospel and we will be seen to believe it, obey it and support the preaching and teaching of it. Trusting and obeying the message of Romans is a life and death issue for others as well.

And third, the key benefit *to God*, besides which all other benefits pale into insignificance, is that if we trust and obey the message of Romans, God will be glorified. And is that not our goal in this life? As the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* says in answer to Question 1, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."

Do you want your life to count? Do you want to make a difference? You may never write a letter as influential as Paul's letter to the Romans, but you can make your life count.

You can make your life count by glorifying God. You can make a difference by glorifying God. Purpose this day to live every day of your life to the glory of God. God is glorified by your obedience to him. Determine to set your life each day by God, by his word, and by his gospel. Don't let anyone or anything detract you from the obedience that comes from faith. Make the glory of God and the enjoyment of him forever your daily goal.

And, come, join me week by week as we study Paul's letter to the Romans to learn about the good news of God, and how we can glorify God and enjoy him forever. Amen.

⁸ Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. J. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1954), xiii.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAAYER:

Our Father, glorify yourself in our obedience to your word and your truth as it is revealed to us in Paul's letter to the Romans. As we embark on this study of Paul's letter to the Romans, help us to understand and apply all that the apostle has written for our edification and maturation.

And all of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.