

## **Romans: The King of the Epistles**

Romans 1:1 (08/19/12)

Ernie Godshall  
Faith Bible Church  
Evansville, Indiana

“Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.”

That’s how Paul starts the book of Romans. I call it the King of the Epistles, with Ephesians the Queen of the Epistles. Romans is probably the greatest, most influential document ever penned by human hands. No book has been used by God in the history of the church more powerfully than this book. Genesis tells us about our beginnings, Revelation how it will end, and Romans how we can be accepted by God.

Maybe you personally came to know Christ through the book of Romans. It is the gospel of God, or God’s good news. One author tells of a friend preaching through Romans. One Sunday a visitor had attended the service. When the service was over, a woman sitting near the young man struck up a conversation with him. She learned a bit about him, and then asked him, “How long have you been a Christian?” The young fellow thought for a few moments, looked down at his watch, and replied, “About ten minutes.” That’s the power of Romans!

We are at the beginning of an exciting journey, probably 20 months, through this fantastic epistle. Here God unfolds for us His grand plan of reaching down and saving sinners through His Son. My title for Romans is, “From Wrath to Reconciliation.” Romans is not a man-centered, ear-tickling book. Be prepared to face truth as you’ve perhaps never faced it before. Romans demolishes all humanistic, man-centered Christianity and exalts God, His grace, His power, His sovereignty, His Son.

Martin Luther described Romans as “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.”

Calvin assures us, “When anyone understands this Epistle, he has a passage opened to him to the whole Scripture.”

Romans is special to me, because when God reached down and saved me back in 1971 or so, we began having a student from the Philadelphia College of the Bible come and have Bible studies with us, and Romans was the book he chose. When I was in seminary my wife worked for a lawyer and he and I met together weekly and we made our way through Romans. I can still see him writing notes in the margin with his black felt-tipped pen. Then after our study we’d go to a restaurant and he taught me to stir horse radish into my tomato juice. Very tasty! Good memories.

This is my third or fourth time preaching through Romans. We as a church went through it back in 1998. But I want to preach through it one more time before I enter the eternal verities which this book talks about. I’m excited about climbing through the lofty hills and valleys and mountain peaks of Romans again, drinking from the rivers of grace and glory flowing in every chapter. I still want to get a T-shirt that says READ ROMANS on the front, with Romans 1:16 on the back, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”

Read through the book of Romans. Read thoughtfully, out loud to yourself if possible, and prayerfully. Read through it all at one time, or at least chapters 1-8.

## **THE INFLUENCE OF ROMANS**

Paul wrote this letter from Corinth on his third missionary journey around AD 57. He wrote to people in the most important and powerful city on the planet of that day. But that city couldn't compare to Paul's powerful message, a message powerful enough to change the hearts of both Jews and Gentiles. Embedded in this document are the great truths of the living God, His Son, grace, justification, peace with God. These are the truths that transformed the Greco-Roman world. These are the truths that galvanized the early Christians when the officials began feeding them to the lions, when Nero poured oil over them and lit them on fire to illumine his degenerate garden parties. Here are the truths of Christianity that have been fought over, argued over, preached and proclaimed by the greatest human beings that ever lived – men like Paul, Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Martyn Lloyd-Jones and many more.

Here are the truths that ended the tyranny of Rome during the Reformation that strengthened the souls of Puritans to stand against the Church of England, that motivated Pilgrims and Puritans to leave England for the New World. Like Alexis de Toqueville said in 1835 when he visited America to find out what made her great, "Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits ablaze with righteousness did I meet the secret of her genius and power." He added, "America is great because she is good, and if America ceases to be good, she will cease to be great." Here we are today with 50 plus million abortions? Legitimizing same sex marriage? Is there a message here for us?

A case could be made that America was founded most directly through the influence of Romans. Romans brought freedom and joy and hope and the assurance of eternal life. And we still need this "gospel of God" in all its glory today! As we sink deeper into neo-paganism, and biblical Christianity is leached from our soil, let's renew our devotion to Romans and the gospel and the God of this gospel and His Son, Jesus Christ!

## **AUGUSTINE**

Let me go back to the conversion of Augustine of Hippo, who was full of philosophy and driven by his lusts. He had a mother Monica who followed him with her prayers and tears. One day in August, AD 386, he was weeping in despair in a garden when he heard a little girl on the other side of a wall singing, "Tolle Lege" or "Take up and read." Looking around, Augustine saw a book opened to Romans 13:13-14, "Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provisions for the flesh in regard to its lusts." Later Augustine wrote, "Instantly, as the sentence ended—by a light, as it were of severity infused into my heart—all the gloom of doubt vanished away." Augustine became a champion of sovereign grace and strongly refuted Pelagius who taught that man has some good in him.

## **MARTIN LUTHER**

We know the story of the miserable monk in Wittenberg named Martin Luther, who was plagued by his sin and guilty and could find no answer. The righteousness of God to him was a condemning righteousness of an angry God. He dreaded, even hated God. But in 1518 while studying Romans and pondering Paul's meaning in Romans 1:17, God shot a bolt of spiritual light into his soul and opened his eyes to understand the gospel of the grace and mercy of God. Luther wrote, "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.... This passage of Paul became to me a gateway to heaven." And thus the Reformation was launched that has effect right down to our own day. Justification by faith alone, through Christ alone, by grace alone, to the glory of God alone, based squarely on the Scripture alone still grips our hearts and will until Jesus comes! These five "solae" of the Reformation form a good part of the doctrine of our own church today.

## **JOHN WESLEY**

Luther wrote a commentary on Romans, and two hundred years later, on May 24, 1738, in a place in Aldersgate Street someone was reading Luther's preface to the commentary. A deeply

troubled soul named John Wesley happened to be there listening intently. He had worn himself out with good deeds, fasting, prayers, and works of mercy. He even went to America to convert the Indians, but, as he lamented, "Who shall convert me?" But that evening in that place he was changed forever. Wesley describes what happened. "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 my salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken my sins away, even mine; and saved me from the law of sin and death."

### **THE BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF ROMANS**

Let's look at the book more directly. It stands first of the epistles, like a glorious doorway to all the rest of the riches of grace and truth in the epistles. Of all the epistles, this is the great missionary epistle. It is a letter for the world, not just the Romans, and for the Gentiles, not just the Jews. It is a book from God and about God. It is God's gospel. It is a book about you and me, and for you and me. Yes, for you and me, from the Almighty God. Take this book and read it.

Romans can be divided into five memorable sections: sin, salvation, sanctification, sovereignty and service.

**SIN** First, it's about man's sin, chapters 1-3. It cuts to the heart of all men whether pagan or religious, and exposes to us our desperate condition under the law of God. God's wrath is upon every one of us. We are all guilty. Without divine intervention, we all perish under the wrath of God! This is the ultimate crisis facing every human being. All have sinned. All are helpless and hopeless in our own power before God. Left to our own devices we are doomed. Left in our sin, we are damned. Left to our own will, we kick against God and will not, indeed cannot, in our sin submit to God. We are at enmity with God. Our status could not be worse. But God's good news could not be better.

**SALVATION** Romans is about salvation, chapters 3-5. God has acted. God has intervened. God has done for us what we couldn't possibly do for ourselves, and He did it all through the work of His Son. We'll see those big 16 cylinder words in Romans 3:22 through Romans 5. Redemption, Propitiation, Imputation, Justification, Reconciliation. Instead of the wrath of God unleashed on us in our sins, it was unleashed on Christ as our substitute. The love of God is poured out into our hearts through Christ and His Spirit. Instead of being enemies of God, we become friends. Instead of being condemned, we are justified by faith alone, plus nothing. Instead of hostility and war, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. How good is that? Where sin abounded, what? Grace super-abounded!

**SANCTIFICATION** And then there is sanctification in Romans 6-8. Are we as believers now free to sin since we're saved by grace and not by works? Paul's answer is, "Don't even think about parking there." (Romans 6:1) No, when you come to Christ, you are brought into union with Christ. Christ is your new identity. What's true of Him is now true of you. He died to sin once for all; you died to sin. He was raised to newness of life; you are raised with Him. He lives to God; you live to God. Sin is no longer your king, grace is! Oh, you'll struggle with remaining sin (Romans 7), but thanks be to God that Jesus Christ is your Savior! He's your righteousness and there's now no condemnation. And the Spirit of Christ is in you empowering you to overcome your sinful habits, even helping you to pray. Nothing will ever separate you from God's love in Christ Jesus! Romans 8 is the Mt. Everest of the Bible, the 30,000 foot high mountain of sheer glory and grace! The journey from the wrath of God in Romans 1 to this absolutely secure, assured loved of God in chapter 8 is a journey you will love for all eternity. "If God be for you," Paul asks, "who will be against you?"

Ladies and gentlemen, this is where our joy is found. Romans should nurture joyful spouses, joyful workers, joyful friends, joyful servants in the church, joyful sufferers, even joyful people in the face of death! We are more than conquerors through Him who loved us! May God fill our hearts with the realities of these truths!

**SOVEREIGNTY** Then we have Paul talking about the sovereignty of God in Romans 9-11. What about Israel? God has mercy on whom He pleases. Right now God is focusing on saving Gentiles, although Jews have been and are being saved. Paul was a Jew. Joel Rosenberg, author of *Implosion*, a current book I'm reading right now, is a Jew and a believer. God is sovereign and when it is time, God will fulfill all His promises to Israel in the future. And all to His glory! Paul's heart bursts out into praise and adoration at this point, Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God.... From Him, through Him, and to Him are all things, to Him be the glory forever!

**SERVICE** Paul winds up his letter with a focus on service and application of all of this truth to our lives. In Romans 12:1-2 he calls on us to present our bodies a living sacrifice and to renew our minds so we can know His will. He tells us how to live under human governments and how to live with other believers who don't have the same opinions about what to eat or wear or what days to keep. He ends in chapter 16 with greetings to many believers there in Rome who well may be destined to severest persecution, but like Paul and like us, though we are treated as sheep for the slaughter, we are more than conquerors through Christ!

### **THE ASSURANCE OF ROMANS**

I want to end by tying several key verses together that amplify the message of Romans. First, Romans 1:1, this is the gospel of God. God's good news. Romans 1:16, the gospel is God's power to save people. But 1:18 says we have a major problem – God's wrath is on us for our offences. But go to 3:22-24. Yes, we're sinners, but God has a plan no human or religion would ever conceive. His plan is to save us, justify us, declare us righteous through His Son, who suffered the wrath of God in our place. He justifies us, not by our performance, but freely by His pure grace through Christ and what He did for us on that cross! And we receive this salvation by faith alone. Then jump over to Romans 5:1, one of my favorites. Because God has justified us by faith alone, not works, what do we have? We have peace with God! God is no longer angry with us. Now He's our Father and warmly smiles on us. And the result is that three times Paul says we rejoice, we glory, and we are totally assured and joyful and confident in God's glory. We're coming to Him, He's receiving us, and we're filled with joy! That's why we can rejoice in trials! And you go down to vs. 11, we rejoice in God Himself! This is God's gospel, God's good news. This is all about God and what He has done for us in and through His Son!

I hope this good news from God has brought you to salvation, that you are secure in Christ, that you have peace with God through Christ. I hope the gospel has changed your heart like Augustine, Luther, Wesley, and that young fellow who, when asked how long he'd been a Christian, looked at his watch and said, "About ten minutes."