

Romans

An Introduction to Freedom

I believe we just finished one of the best series we've done at our church. Many of you have commented on how you will never read the story of the Prodigal the same way again. Today as we delve into our new series, I truly believe that most of you will have the same impression about this Book, Romans, where Paul shares his most complete work of systematic theology. He gives to the believers in Rome his unabashed view of the Gospel, and we get to sit in and listen as the whole thing unfolds.

Let's first look at Chapter 1, verses 1-7:

Romans 1

¹Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God— ²the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures ³regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, ⁴and who through the Spirit^[a] of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God^[b] by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. ⁵Through 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. ⁶And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

⁷To 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.

Nowhere else does Paul give such an elaborate greeting at the beginning of any of his letters. We can assume that it was for a few reasons that this lengthy salutation was given.

First of all, Paul had never been to Rome. This was a church that was started by someone other than himself. Quite possibly, this church originated after some of those converts who were visiting at the time of Pentecost returned home. If you read Acts Chapter 2, you'll see that Luke makes mention of the many that had come from all over the empire and some from as far as Rome.

Another reason why Paul went to great lengths to introduce himself, was that many were still questioning Paul's credentials. Was he to be trusted, and was he someone they could rely on for an accurate account of the Gospel of Christ?

It was imperative that these questions be settled. Paul was not just writing this letter because he wanted them to get to know him. There was a direct purpose for it, and Paul was certainly not going to let his discourse be shunned because of a prejudice or misconception about who he was.

But his absence and the misconceptions about him were not the only things that would present a problem for Paul as he begins his book. We really need to look at the time at which Paul is writing to them.

It is clear that Paul is writing before his last missionary journey. So we put the writing of the book of Romans right around 55-59 AD. We give it that span because of some things that were taking place at that time.

Claudius the Emperor of the Rome Empire had gotten wind of various Jewish uprisings in the capital city, and though they seemed petty, he began to grow tired of all the little skirmishes that his soldiers would have to squelch. Finally in 49 AD he had banished the Jews from Rome, which means that the demographic of the Christian church in Rome changed overnight. It probably became the only Christian church that had no Jewish converts in its midst. And for about 5 years that was the makeup of this church. We need to understand this point so we can make sense of the anger that formed between the two factions when the Jewish Christians returned to Rome after the death of Claudius. During those 5 years the Roman church had grown accustomed to living out the gospel quite recklessly, at least that is how the returning Jewish Christians would see it. And as the Jewish Christians moved back in, the Gentile Christians felt like they were imposing their own guilt and obsession with the law on them.

This was the back drop on which Paul starts to paint his best work, the Book of Romans.

It was about 15 years ago today, that my wife and I decided to take our kids to the beach for some badly needed relaxation time. We love heading to the beach on the 4th of July. I do admit it is risky. If you've ever been there with small children, you will know what I'm talking about. It is about as close to a war zone as I will ever experience. I remember my wife saying to me, "Let's get your mother and father to go along with us". I liked the idea, not because of the war zone comment, but because they really hadn't been in Florida that long, and they were always up for the opportunity of getting to see new places. There was, however, a bit of hesitancy on my part. My dad was never one for large bodies of water, and this was the Sabbath so it became a double "whammy".

Well they both agreed to come, as we expected. I mean who can turn down an afternoon with our two lovely children? While my wife and my mom were getting the kids' things together, Dad and I had gotten the van packed and ready. I turned on the AC and started to get it cooled down as my dad climbed in the front next to me. As we both sat there with the AC blowing in our faces, my dad looked down and noticed a red nylon sheath along side of my bucket seat. "What's that?" he asked. I felt a small uneasiness creep into my voice as I tightened my grip on the steering wheel. I knew what he would think if I told him the truth, but I thought to myself, "You know, I'm just going to tell him. He's living down here now, and we are going to have learn to live along side one another again."

"It's a Kite," I said casually. "A kite," he said softly. "You're going to fly a kite on the Sabbath?" It was not hard to notice the condescending judgment in his voice. I had heard it before many times, and immediately I could feel the rebellion to it stirring in my heart. "Yes Dad," I blurted, "I have promised JT that I am going to teach him how to fly a kite, and we are going to have a great time spending the Sabbath together holding on to this kite." He didn't stay for the next line that I wanted to say. He lifted the handle on the door and stepped out of the van. I pounded my palms on the wheel and gritted my teeth. I resolved myself to not give in. I am not going to live my life dictated by my father's view of the law. He has no freedom whatsoever, and nothing could be more repulsive for me or my family than to keep the law the way he keeps the law.

I had really only studied Romans briefly in my classes, but I knew that Paul would want to say a few things to my dad.

It was as if he was carrying around this huge bag of guilt, just like all of the Jewish Christians who had come back to Rome, and now they were going to put the Gentile Christians in their place. But Paul was beyond that.

You see Paul writes the book of Romans for 3 main reasons:

One is a practical one – He needs this Church. It is going to be the church that supports the work in the west. Just like Antioch was his stronghold in the east, Paul needed the Church in Rome to take up the slack for the work to progress onto Spain and further.

The second reason that Paul writes to the Romans is more of a strategic one. He knows that, if there are factions in the church, not only will they be unable to support themselves or other mission endeavors, they will also destroy the work that already has been started. So he rapidly gets word to them before he even gets there so that he can start making peace before the dissention eats them alive.

The third reason is a theological one. Up until now nothing in writing had been given to any Christian as to a complete process of what it meant to become, live and grow as a Christian. And even though the Book of Romans was a bit reactionary, it was much more systematic than any other letter in its orientation to the Jewish and Gentile segments of the early Christian church.

Paul caught them both off guard. As you will discover in Romans, Paul opens up to both of them, exposing the short comings on both sides of the isle.

My dad did return. After about 3 or 4 minutes my dad opened the door and climbed back into the van. I could tell that his eyes were moist and sad. He looked down and said, “I’m sorry. I know your mother and I have made mistakes when we were raising you kids.” I was not ready for that. He ruined my entire rebuttal, but he went on. “When I was growing up, my dad was gone, and we were left to worry about quite a few things, namely our food, our safety and our salvation. Well the pastor told my mother how she should raise us so we would be secure in God, and I guess I just tried to pass that down to you”.

I began to understand for the first time what it meant to live as a Christian through my Dad’s eyes. I still didn’t want to see it his way, but I began to understand it. It was an experience of peacemaking, something that my dad and I would continue to do from then on.

It is with this premise that Paul carefully crafts his words so as to pull both factions into the power of the Gospel. He knew that both sides looked at the Law in different ways.

The Jewish Christians saw the law as a mark to achieve and measure their lives by. When they fell short, it brought shame and guilt. They couldn’t understand why their Ex-Gentile brothers and sisters didn’t share that same kind of guilt. They would many times try to impose it on them, but they weren’t getting the same results.

On the other hand, the Gentile Christians had not honored the importance of what the law could actually do for them. They had given into what they deemed reasonable for themselves and, with a naïve recklessness, they all but did away with the law.

So to both these sides Paul jumps in and shows them that the Gospel frees the guilty and the naïvely reckless and delivers them to the truth. It is this truth that Paul wants them to come to.

Please know that this is why Paul is so emphatic when he writes in Romans 1:16-17:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. ¹⁷For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

It was a long time later, and now I found myself facing another mountain in my experience as a father. My daughter was getting married, and I was trying hard to write the sermon for the wedding day. As I thought about the words to say, my mind began to go to places I didn't want it to go. I started to think back at all of the mistakes I had made as a father. Just like my own father I wanted to start apologizing for the many ways in which I felt like I had let her down. I thought, "Wow, if this is the message she gets from me, she's going to go into this marriage with a wrong impression what a father should be like."

I thought, "Well, I have some time. I should take her out on one of our 'daddy dates' and say all the things I should have said in the last 23 years. In 2 hours, she'll get a crash course on what a father really should be like." It really did go through my head, but fortunately for my daughter, it really didn't get played out that way. I finally came to the realization that all those miscues and missed opportunities of being the father that I thought I should be have been were a part of a much bigger picture that has brought me and my daughter to this place. The mistakes only showed the strength of our relationship more vividly, and no crash course in fatherhood was going to improve on a lifetime of unconditional love.

If some of you are feeling guilty because of your past, let it go. If some of you have found that your contentment has turned to cynicism, sarcasm and pride, let it go. And if some of you are wondering what it would be like to be on a journey that is being led by someone other than yourself, then give this series a go.

It is the Gospel, and it what will free you to be everything you were meant to be.