

Today we begin our new series.

A few weeks ago, someone asked me if I'd ever preached a sermon on a certain passage in Romans, and I said, "I can't remember, but "I reckon I would've. I'm pretty sure I've preached my way through Romans"... after all, it's a pretty important book... Anyway, when I got home and tried to dig out that old sermon, I discovered "I've never preached through the book of Romans." I read it twice a year (in my daily Bible reading program). I've taken numerous bible study groups through the book of Romans... I often refer to verses and paragraphs from Romans in my sermons.... But to my shame, I've never taken a church through Romans, in a preaching series...

In my opinion, The book of Romans, is one of the most important books of the Bible. Without Paul's letter to the Romans, we would have very little understanding about why Jesus died on the cross. It explains, more fully, than any other book of the Bible, about how Jesus Christ saves us. It explains the work of God – of grace; and mercy; and faith; and the righteousness of God...

John Calvin (one of the reformers) said "if a man understands [the book of Romans], he has a sure road opened for him to the understanding of the whole Scripture."

William Tyndale, the father of English Bible translators, believed that every Christian should learn [the book of Romans] by heart. He said "The more it is studied – the easier it is; the more it is chewed – the pleasanter it is"ⁱ.

And the book of Romans, has power, to change our lives:

*In the summer of the year 386, a brilliant professor of rhetoric, sat weeping in the garden of his friend. He wanted to begin a new life but he didn't have the strength to break with the old. And he heard a child's sing-song voice: "Take it and read it; take it and read it." He picked up what was nearby, Paul's Letter to the Romans, and began reading Romans 13:13–14, "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...."*ⁱⁱ

"No further would I read," he tells us, "nor had I any need; instantly at the end of this sentence, a clear light flooded my heart and all the darkness of doubt vanished away." ... (And Augustine Aurelius (who became known as Saint Augustine) gave his life to Jesus, and became one of Christianity's most prominent authors and theologians.)

In the year 1515, a Roman Catholic Monk, began to teach his students, from the book of Romans. But there was a phrase that he struggled with: "The righteousness of God"... Because **he** understood that the righteousness of God was something that could only **alienate** him **from** God... He thought that the righteousness of God, could only condemn him; and judge him; and punish him, as the miserable sinner that he was...

But as he studied the book of Romans, he finally grasped that in Christ, the righteousness of God, belongs to the Christian... He wrote, "*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 scripture took on 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 in Paul became to me a gateway to heaven."

Two years later Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, and the Protestant Reformation began!

*In the evening of May 24, 1738, a man "went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine," he wrote in his journal, "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."*

And that man (John Wesley), became a great evangelical preacher, and was instrumental, in the great Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century, and was the founder of the Methodist movement....ⁱⁱⁱ (And we have a John Wesley here today, named after him)...

I don't know what God's going to do in your heart, (or my heart), as we study this book of Romans,,. But there is one common thread, that runs through those testimonies... They were all people, desiring and longing, to be brought into a deeper relationship with Christ. And through the words of this letter, the Lord our God did exactly that...

Now, the Book of Romans, is a book that we have to wrestle with... It is a very dense book. It is a very theological book (it teaches us about God)... It is a book that describes the depths of the riches of the grace and mercy of God... And sometimes, we may find ourselves out-of-depth... We may find that, in places, no matter how hard we try to understand it, we find ourselves lost, and unable to fully comprehend, the depth of what Paul is trying to explain to us...

And so my prayer, is that our hearts (your heart and my heart), would not only be open to the Holy Spirit (to give us understanding), but that we would be **craving**, for the Holy Spirit, to be touching our lives, and to be drawing us into a deeper experience of the grace and mercy and the righteousness of God...

We will be engaging our minds, as we wrestle with Romans... But we will also be engaging our hearts and our emotions... Because as we begin to understand the significance of the Gospel, as explained in Romans, I can guarantee you, we cannot help, but to feel loved and valued and wonderfully holy...

Now, there are 4 important questions that I always ask myself, when I begin to study one of the letters in the Bible:

1. Who wrote it?
2. Who is it written to?
3. Why was it written? (what is its purpose?)
4. What is the theme of the letter?

Obviously, there will be a lot more questions, that particular passages will bring up within the letter, but this is where I begin.

And with Romans, the first two questions are very easy to answer (because we're told in the very first paragraph)... The book of Romans, is a letter, that was written by the Apostle Paul. And he wrote it to the church in Rome. He wasn't writing it to all the Romans (he had no interest in the Roman empire, or the seat of power) – he was writing to the **church** in Rome...

The 3rd question, however (The purpose of Paul writing the letter), is much more elusive... He doesn't actually tell us **why** he wrote the letter.

In fact, it might seem strange that he's writing this letter at all, because he's writing to a church he's never even visited. Paul is a Roman Citizen, but he's never been to Rome. Most letters that Paul wrote, he was writing to churches that he had established... But he **didn't** plant the church in Rome. In fact, we don't know who planted the church in Rome...

So, what **do** we know about the church in Rome?

Well, in the 2nd chapter of Acts, we can read about when the Holy Spirit was poured out, at Pentecost. Pentecost was the

great Jewish harvest festival. And Jews and converts to Judaism, **including** visitors from Rome, were in Jerusalem (for the festival). And they were there that day, when the Holy Spirit came upon Peter, and he got up and preached, and he shared the good news of Jesus Christ. And when they heard Peter speak, many accepted the message. And 3000 people were baptised that day.

So, almost certainly, the church in Rome began as Jewish Christians, returned home, from that Pentecost harvest festival...

So, the Roman Church had Jewish roots, but we know (from looking at the contents of the letter), that Paul is addressing some issues that had arising, between Jews and gentiles (who were trying to live together as Christians ...)

In the year 49A.D., all Jews were expelled from Rome... As we studied the book of Acts, we came across Priscilla and Aquila, who Paul met up with in Corinth. And this husband and wife, were Jewish Christians, had been expelled from Rome. But around about 54A.D., they were allowed to return to Rome again. And in fact, Paul greets them in this letter...

Alright, so the church had a very changing character: It began with Jewish roots, and so (almost certainly), the leadership were Jewish... But then the Jews were run out of town, and so the leadership had to be taken on by the Gentile Christians... But then the Jews were allowed to come back to Rome again... Now, can you imagine, the upheaval that church would've gone through??? And when we get to chapters 11 & 14 & 15, we're going to see Paul addressing

some issues to do with relationships between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians...

But I don't believe this was his **only** purpose for writing...

I suspect his purpose is 2-fold...

As a pastor, and as an apostle, Paul was always working to build disciples of Jesus up in their faith. He tells them that he's always praying for them. And the instruction he gives – we can see that he's always wanting to build them up in the faith.

But I suspect his **main** purpose, is to introduce himself **to** the church in Rome...

Paul has been wanting to get to Rome for a long time. And he's telling the Roman church, that he's wanting to come and visit them. *I've got to go to Jerusalem (things mightn't go well for me there)... But I'm wanting to go on mission in Spain, and I'm wanting to drop in on you on the way...*

Of course, when he did finally make it to Rome, he wasn't on his way to Spain any longer. He was arrested in Jerusalem, and was taken as a prisoner to Rome. And we read all about that, as we studied Acts, a few months ago.

But whenever Paul was going to go on mission, into a new area (where there were no churches), he always had a church (a base) nearby, who would send him out, and support him, as he went as a missionary on his next trip... And most bible scholars believe, Paul was writing to the church in Rome, so they could get to know him, and have confidence that he had a good solid understanding of the Christian faith, and that he

was someone they could trust, to send out as a missionary, into a new field of endeavour...

Sometimes, I get an offer from somebody I don't know, wanting to come and speak either at church, or in some kind of mission in this district. And before I give my approval, it's important that I know, what they believe? Are they going to preach the true Gospel? Or are they going to teach lies, and half-truths, that will cause more damage to Jesus' church than good...

And so the letter to the church in Rome, is filled with theological richness, as Paul tells the Church in Rome, what he believes the Gospel to be ,, which brings us to the theme.

How, does one summarise the theme of Romans?

- It explains individual salvation, but it's more than that.
- It talks about the mystical union of Christians as a whole, reconciled to Christ, but it's more than that
- It addresses how Jews and Gentiles, can cohere as one people of God... But it's more than that.
- It's preparing a mission base, because what he's written, is at the heart of mission... But it's more than that...
- It teaches us ethics – there's some great sections there, on obedience and how we as Christians should live... But it's more than that.

I was beginning to despair, as I read Romans over and over again, and read commentary after commentary – how can I summarise the theme of Romans? It's so vast and it pulls in so much teaching, about Christ, and about what it means to be a Christian... How can I summarise a theme???

But then I read a commentary by Douglass Moo, and he stated the problem that I'd been grappling with... and the answer was just so simple... The theme, is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ:

- Includes individual salvation, but it's more than that.
- The Gospel of Jesus Christ, includes Christians as a whole, being reconciled to Christ, but it's more than that.
- The Gospel of Jesus Christ, addresses how very different people, can cohere as one people of God, but it's more than that
- The gospel of Jesus Christ, holds at its heart, mission... But it's more than that.
- The Gospel of Jesus Christ, includes obedience to God, but it's more than obedience.
- It's about faith and grace and mercy and righteousness....

The Gospel of Jesus Christ, is all of these things... And if we try to separate them, we haven't heard, and we haven't received, the **whole** Gospel...

So, there's an introduction. There's so much more I could say, but let's pray instead.

Lord Jesus Christ,
We thank you. We praise you,
for the good news of the Gospel.
And Lord, we pray,
that as we study this letter to the church in Rome,
that You would open our hearts and our minds,
to the **full** Gospel.
And that We would encounter You,
in a very real and personal way,
And that we as a church,

will be empowered by your Holy Spirit,
to be a church, in a manner,
that will glorify You in this world.
In the Name of Christ Jesus, our Lord and Saviour,
Amen.

ⁱ (*prologue to Romans in his 1534 English New Testament*)

ⁱⁱ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-28/386-augustine-converts-to-christianity.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Testimony illustrations from <https://www.ivpress.com/bible/romans/>