

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 5/22/94
Romans 1:1-7 "A Letter That Could Change Your Life"

Intro: You have in your possession a letter that could change your life. Throughout history, people have read it and have never been the same again.

In the summer of AD 386, a man named Aurelius Augustinus was changed by this letter. He had been a professor of Rhetoric at Milan for two years. He was also a man who had been enslaved by his passions. He knew he needed to change, to break with his old way of loose living, yet he lacked the fortitude to make this decision. One day, while in the garden of his friend Alypius, he heard a child singing these words, "Tolle, lege! tolle, lege!" (Take up and read! Take up and read!). Convinced this was a message from God, Augustine picked up the scroll which was laying at his friend's side, and his eyes came upon these words: "not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof." Augustine's life was changed by the letter he read. In his words, "No further would I read, 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 (Bruce, Romans, 58)."

What letter had he read? The same one that changed Martin Luther's life. In November 1515, Martin Luther was an Augustinian monk and professor of theology at the University of Wittenburg. He was a man in a battle with himself. His conscience shouted at him due to his inability to keep the law of God. That winter he began to study and teach to his students one of the letters written by the apostle Paul. The letter? Romans. As he prepared his lectures, he became enthralled with a doctrine he had never understood: Justification by faith. He later wrote these words, "I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans, and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, 'the righteousness of God'...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 to heaven (Bruce, 59)." Romans was the letter that changed his life.

On the evening of May 24, 1738, John Wesley went to a meeting at Aldersgate Street. Wesley had been a missionary to the American colony, yet did not have a personal relationship with Christ. For years he wrestled with doubt, searching for that which was missing. He found it at Aldersgate. At that service, someone read Martin Luther's preface to Romans, and here's what happened. Wesley wrote this 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 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 (Bruce, 59)." Not only was Wesley's life changed, but God used his conversion to spark the great evangelical revival of the 18th century.

You hold in your hands a letter that can change your life!

This morning, we are going to embark on a journey that has the potential to change our lives forever. We are going to launch a study of Paul's letter to the Romans. Since Romans is a lengthy book, we'll take a section at a time. For the next several months, we'll investigate the first four chapters of the cadillac of Paul's letters.

Why study Romans? For many reasons, but perhaps the chief being this-- Romans is a letter that can change our lives. Romans can change the life of this church, so we will never be the same again. Romans can transform your life as an individual.

What is it about Romans that makes it so special? We find out at the beginning.

Proposition: In the first seven verses of the letter, we see three reasons why this letter has the power to change our lives.

I. Romans is a letter with a special Author (1).

A. He was devoted to His Master.

B. He was devoted to His Mission.

C. He was devoted to His Message.

II. Romans is a letter with a special Aim (2-6).

A. It explains the Gospel of God (2).

B. It exalts the Son of God (3-5).

1. His Humanity (3)

2. His Deity (4)

3. His Purpose (5-6)

III. Romans is a letter with a special Audience (7)

Here is the first reason we can know that Romans can change our lives.

I. Romans is a letter with a special Author (1).

Obviously, the Word of God is God-breathed. The Holy Spirit is the author of Scripture. Yet He didn't zap papyrus to give us Bible manuscripts. He used real people. And in the case of Romans, He utilized a man who was one of a kind--Paul.

You know about Paul. At one time in his life, Paul (then Saul) hunted down followers of Jesus. Then, by God's grace, he was converted to Christ. The Lord commissioned him as the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul spent ten years, from AD 47 to 57 spreading the Good News of Christ to the people that lived near the Aegean Sea. He planted churches in Iconium, Philippi, Thessalonica, Ephesus, and Corinth. He literally saturated the area with the Gospel. But his job was not over. He set his sights on another unreached land--Spain.

In the winter of AD 56-57, Paul went to Corinth (see Bruce, 11). He stayed in the home of a friend named Gaius, a man he had led to Christ. His third missionary journey was over. He was on his way to Jerusalem to take to them a gift of money from the Gentile Christians. While in Corinth, Paul had a three month wait, just the time he needed to write a special letter.

Though a Roman citizen, Paul had never been to Rome. He longed to go there, and decided that after his trip to Jerusalem, on his way to Spain, he would visit Rome. To prepare the Christians there for his coming, many of whom, he did not know personally, he wrote the letter we call Romans.

Romans is no ordinary letter. It took Paul about three months to write it. What he wrote was the fruit of his life, and the summary of his message. He dictated the letter to a man named Tertius (16:22). Then, a godly woman named Phebe delivered the epistle from Corinth to Rome (16:1).

To introduce himself to the Christians in Rome, Paul began his letter with the customary greeting. In v 1, he shared with the Romans three things about himself.

A. He was devoted to His Master.

V 1 "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ." The word "servant" was a vivid word for the Roman Christians. In the Roman Empire, there were 60 million slaves. A slave is a person that belongs to someone else.

Paul begins his letter by announcing, "I belong to Jesus Christ. He is my Master. I am his servant."

B. He was devoted to His Mission.

V 1 continues, "called to be an apostle." (NASB "called as an apostle") The word "apostle" contains rich overtones. What is an apostle? By definition, it refers to "one who is sent by authority with a commission." (Wiersbe, 514)

Paul described himself as the "least of the apostles" in I Cor 15:9. Unlike the 12, he had not spent three years with Jesus. Yet he had seen Jesus, on the road to Damascus. The Lord told him through Ananias (Acts 9:15), "For he (Paul) is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel." Notice v 5, "By whom we have received grace and apostleship, for obedience to the faith among all nations, for His name." Paul was the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul devoted his life to that mission. Prior to this letter, he had been preaching Christ to the nations for 20 years. He pioneered works in unreached areas. He invaded Satan's dark turf with the Light of the gospel. No matter what the cost.

C. He was devoted to His Message.

Notice the third phrase, "separated unto the gospel of God (1)." Paul did not invent the message he preached. He was separated unto the gospel.

Do you believe in separation? The word "separation" is a buzzword in American Christianity. Some despise it. Others champion it ("We are separatists!"). By definition, the word means "to mark off by boundries, to set apart."

When we think of separation, we have in mind being separated FROM something (a list of do's and don'ts). God calls us to be separated from sin. But notice Paul says he was separated UNTO something. You see, there is a difference between separation and isolation. The word "Pharisee" means "separated one." The Pharisees practiced smug segregation. Paul did too, before he met Christ. After he met Christ, he associated with all types of people, in all levels of pagan society. With one aim.

He was devoted to his message. He said he was "separated unto the gospel." What is the gospel? That's what Romans tells us. Romans is a treatise on what the gospel is.

The word "gospel" has an interesting background. In Paul's day, the word was associated with the Roman emperor. When something important happened in the life of

the emperor, such as the birth of a son, the event was referred to as "euangelia." It was an announcement of good news (Cranfield, 3).

That's what the gospel of God is. God has given us good news, the greatest of news! Paul devoted himself to spreading that message.

Keep this in mind as we study Romans. As an apostle, Paul's authority was not his own. It was delegated to him by the Lord. He spoke for the Lord. He devoted his life to the message of the gospel of God (see: Galatians 1:13-16).

There's Paul's introduction. Did you notice something? Paul took one verse to talk about himself, and then the majority of the next 16 chapters to talk about his Lord! That makes sense when you think about it, for if you really want to know what makes Paul tick, you need to know about the Lord he loved and served.

Who do you like to talk about, yourself or Christ? Who gets the attention in your life? Most of us are too preoccupied with self.

Tran: The first reason Romans can change our lives is because it is a letter with a special author.

II. Romans is a letter with a special Aim (2-6).

Why did Paul write the letter to the Romans? Romans is a letter of 16 chapters. Each verse seems to be packed with meaning and significance. One problem in studying a book so large is we have a tendency to get lost looking at the trees, and miss the forest; we can get wrapped up debating the details, and miss the main intent.

In Paul's introduction, he hints at the aim of his letter. Later, in 1:16-17, he will state his theme outright. Rom 1:16-17, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ...For in it is the righteousness of God revealed."

I believe that the theme of the letter is the righteousness of God. Habakkuk 2:4 says, "The just shall live by faith." That verse is quoted three times in the New Testament, in Romans, in Galatians, and in Hebrews.

Harry Ironside makes this observation (9-10), "Romans has to do particularly with the first two words. Its message is, 'THE JUST shall live by faith,' answering the question that is raised in the book of Job, 'How shall a man be just with God?'"

How is it possible for sinful people like us to be made right with God? How can we go to bed at night knowing we are at peace with our Maker? Romans answers these questions for us.

In his introduction, Paul highlights two aims which run through the letter.

A. It explains the Gospel of God (2).

V 2 "Which he had promised before..." "Which" points back to "the gospel" in verse 1. You see, Paul did not invent the gospel. The "good news" is really "old news." God promised it along time ago through the prophets. Where? In the Old Testament Scriptures.

For whom did Paul write this letter, Jewish Christians or Gentile Christians? The answer is both. According to Josephus, a large Jewish colony lived in Rome (see

also Acts 28:17-28). I read one estimate (Dunn) that suggested there were 40,000 to 50,000 Jews living in Rome at the time.

This Jewish audience needed to know that the gospel has firm, Jewish roots. The message of the gospel is the fulfillment of God's sovereign plan revealed by the prophets.

Romans is a letter which explains the gospel. What does it say about it?

Overview of Romans: There are several good outlines of Romans. Warren Wiersbe offers one that is concise, and easy to follow (p. 513).

I. Introduction (1:1-17)

II. Sin--Righteousness Demanded (1:18-3:20)

III. Salvation--Righteousness Declared (3:21-5:21)

IV. Sanctification--Righteousness Defended (ch 6-8)

V. Sovereignty--Righteousness Declined (ch 9-11)

VI. Service--Righteousness Demonstrated (12:1-15:7)

VII. Conclusion (15:8-16:27)

Paul's aim in the book of Romans is to explain the gospel. Now a second aim.

B. It exalts the Son of God (3-5).

V 3 "Concerning His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." The preposition "concerning" points back to v 1 again, to "the gospel." That is, Paul is saying, "I am separated to the gospel, the good news, which concerns God's Son, Jesus Christ. In the letter to the Romans, Paul exalts Jesus Christ.

What did Jesus mean to Paul? He meant everything. What struck Paul when He thought of Jesus? Notice three traits that impressed Paul about our Savior.

1. His Humanity (3)

V 3 "who was made of the seed of David according to the flesh." Jesus was a real man. He wasn't a phantom. He lived, and breathed, and bled, like we do. He had a human lineage. He was made "according to the flesh."

Jesus also had a royal lineage. He was a descendant of King David. He was the long awaited Deliverer of Israel, the Messiah, the Anointed One. He is the King!

Paul was impressed by Jesus' humanity. Yet He was more than a mere man.

2. His Deity (4)

V 4 "And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead." Jesus was "declared" to be the Son of God. He is the perfect man, yes, but never forget Jesus is also God.

What act validated His deity? "BY the resurrection from the dead." Great men have come and gone in world history, but this sets Jesus in a class by Himself. He conquered death. He rose again. He demonstrated His deity by His resurrection.

You may wonder, "Why did Jesus do what He did?" Trait #3...

3. His Purpose (5-6)

Notice the climactic, last phrase of v 5--"FOR HIS NAME."

God is calling out a people for Himself, for His Name. Jesus came into this world with one great purpose in mind. Matthew put it this way, "He came not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." Luke stated it thus, "He came to seek and to save the lost." What a great purpose!

Now watch this. Here's where we fit in. We are the beneficiaries of this purpose! We have been called to belong to Christ. How do I know that?

Listen to what Paul told the Roman Christians in v 6, "Among whom are ye also the called of Jesus Christ." "Ye" is plural. You Christians in Rome. You Christians in Wheelersburg. You are the called of Jesus Christ.

Our identity is linked to Christ. What does that mean? That's what Romans will teach us. Romans is a special letter because it has this twofold aim in mind. It explains the Gospel, and it exalts the Son of God.

Tran: I want you to notice a third reason Romans is a special letter. It's Author, Aim,

III. Romans is a letter with a special Audience (7)

V 7 "To all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called saints: Grace to you..." All roads lead to Rome. Such was the case with Christianity.

How did Christianity reach Rome? Remember, Paul didn't start the church there. Nor did Peter (there's no mention of Peter in the list of names in Romans 16). How then?

Acts 2:10 gives us a clue. Remember what happened at Pentecost in Acts 2? The Spirit came upon the followers of Jesus. The Jews were so impacted that 3,000 were saved that day. Jews from all over the world, including some Jewish visitors from Rome. Are you following me?

After the Feast of Pentecost, these Roman Jews went back home to Italy. Guess what they took with them? The gospel of Christ. You say, "But they weren't apostles, were they? They weren't trained preachers, were they?" No. But they took the gospel to Rome. There are also indications that other lay people were involved in evangelizing Rome. Business people like Aquila and Priscilla, tentmakers who took the Great Commission seriously (Acts 18:2).

There's an old saying that goes, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." Is it biblical? Not if you are a Christian, not if you believe verse 7. Paul says to them, "You are called saints." ("to be" not in greek text). You are called saints. You are set apart, holy, sacred. You're in this world, but not of this world.

When in Rome, do as the Romans do? No. When in Rome, do as Christ would do. When in Wheelersburg, do as Christ would do.

Romans was written to a special audience. Do you know why? Because although they dressed differently, spoke a different language, lived in a different century, they were people a lot like us. The message they needed, we need too.

Challenge: Why are we here? Paul knew why. He wanted the Romans to know why. Are we here to enjoy ourselves, to build our own little empires? Are we here to stand for causes? Beloved, we are here for one reason. To spread the good news of Jesus Christ. Like Paul did. Because only Jesus Christ can change lives. Just read Romans.