

INTRODUCTION TO LIFE

by Ray C. Stedman

I don't know any letter that is more fundamental and foundational than Paul's letter to the Romans. It is unquestionably the greatest of all of Paul's letters and the widest in its scope. It is most intent and penetrating in its insight into the understanding of truth; therefore, it is one of the books of the New Testament that every Christian ought to be thoroughly familiar with. If you haven't mastered the book of Romans and aren't able to think through this book without a Bible before you, then I urge you to set that as your goal.

Master the book of Romans -- be so acquainted with it that you can outline it and think of its great themes without a Bible open before you. That requires reading it and studying it and thinking it through in careful detail. I think it is safe to say that Romans probably is the most powerful human document that has ever been penned.

This week, the Freedom Train is in this area, bringing to us some of the great documents of our American history, such as one of the original copies of the Constitution and Thomas Jefferson's copy of the Declaration of Independence. I hope all of you will see this exhibit. We value these great documents. In many ways, our freedom rests upon them, and we Americans rightly honor and respect them. But even these great documents of human liberties could not hold a candle to the effect and impact the epistle to the Romans has had upon human history. To this letter we owe some of the greatest leaders of the church of all time:

- St. Augustine, whose shadow has loomed large over the church since the fourth century, was converted by reading just a few verses of the 13th chapter of the book of Romans.
- Martin Luther, studying the writings of Augustine, came to an understanding of faith. The 16th verse of the very first chapter of the letter spoke volumes to Luther's heart as he thought and meditated on the great phrase, "The righteous shall live by faith." This book's effect on Luther ushered in the great Protestant Reformation, the greatest awakening that our world has seen since the days of the apostles.
- John Bunyan, studying Romans in the Bedford jail, was so caught up by the themes of this great letter that out of it he penned *Pilgrim's Progress*, which has taught many people how a Christian relates to the world in which he lives.
- As you know, John Wesley, listening one day to Luther's preface to the commentary on Romans, found his own heart strangely warmed and out of that came the great evangelical awakening of the eighteenth century.
- In our own day, Karl Barth has been associated with studies in Romans that have shaken the theological world. We may not always agree with everything Barth writes, but one thing is clear -- his arguments on the book of Romans absolutely demolished liberal Christianity about two or three decades ago.

Paul's letter to the Romans was written about 56-58 A. D., somewhere around the middle of the first century, when the apostle was in Corinth on his third missionary journey.

As you read this letter, you can catch glimpses of the conditions in the Greek city of Corinth. Those of you who have visited the site of Corinth know this city was located at the crossroads of trade in the empire. It was one of the notoriously wicked cities in the Roman world and much of that atmosphere is characterized here in the letter to the Romans.

This letter was written only about 30 years after the crucifixion and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Today is December 7, Pearl Harbor Day, and many of us realize that it was 34 years ago today that the Japanese

bombed Pearl Harbor. The events of that day are etched unforgettably in the memory of many of us who lived through that time. Anyone of us who was over 10 years old then knows what he was doing when the news of the bombing of Pearl Harbor came. Such was the impact of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. The memory of it still was sharply etched in the minds of Christians all over the Roman Empire.

This letter was sent to them to teach them and instruct them and bring to their remembrance the meaning of these fantastic events that had so startled and amazed men in that first century.

The first seventeen verses of this letter constitute an introduction. In this introduction are the great themes of this epistle, the things that Paul is going to return to again and again as he boldly puts forth these tremendous concepts that have so fantastically altered and changed the lives of men. There is both a literary and a logical order to these themes. The literary order, of course, follows the pattern in which they appear here in the epistle to the Romans. The logical order is not quite the same, but I am going to combine the two orders. The progression forms a kind of target. The bull's-eye, the heart of the target, is the theme: Jesus is Lord. We can see this theme in the first seven verses of the introduction.

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

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. {Rom 1:1-7 NIV}

At the heart of Paul's argument is this central personage: Jesus Christ, our Lord. That, certainly, is the theme of the epistle to the Romans, as it is the theme of all Paul's writings and all of the New Testament. Union in Christ is the central truth that God wants us to see. As Paul himself wrote in the letter to the Colossians, "Christ in you, the hope of glory," {Col 1:27b}. That is the great truth from which all others flow.

Now, sometimes commentators and Bible teachers identify certain of the great emphases that come from that truth as being the central truth. For instance, they emphasize justification by faith, or sanctification, that is, solving the problems of sin. But these themes all stem from the great central theme -- union with Christ. That is why the person of the Lord Jesus is central in all of the apostle's thinking, just as it is central in God's program for mankind everywhere.

We are not simply followers of a philosophy, or even of a philosopher, but of a savior, a redeemer, a person -- and he must be central in all things. From this central point, Paul builds a logical progression of concentric circles, like a target. The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is the next theme flowing out from the central personage of Jesus. Next, the gospel is brought to us through the apostle, so Paul will speak of himself as the great apostle to the Gentiles, through whom the gospel is spread. Then, the recipients of that gospel are the Christians, the Roman Christians to whom this letter was written, and to ourselves as well, the twentieth century recipients of the letter to the Romans. Then, as the final out thrust of this tremendous involvement which begins with the Lord himself and flows through the apostle and the Christians, the gospel reaches out to the nations of the world -- Jew and Gentile alike.

We'll see this logical order as we go through the introductory paragraph of this letter.

In his introduction, Paul points out that the Lord was promised to us; he came as predicted in the Old Testament. The gospel was promised beforehand through the "prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son." One of the most important {things} that we can learn about our faith is that it comes to us through the anticipation and prediction of centuries of teaching and preaching. We are familiar with the predictive passages

in the Old Testament. We remember that when Jesus walked with the two men on the road to Emmaus, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he taught them "the things concerning himself," {Luke 24:27 RSV}. Jesus saw himself predicted in the Old Testament. We can see clearly the great messianic passages in the Old Testament that point unerringly to Jesus. When you read the Old Testament, you are gripped by the feeling that someone is coming! All the prophets speak of him, all the sacrifices point toward him, all the longings and dreams and yearnings of men are hoping for someone to come who will solve the problems of man. When you close the Old Testament, he has not arrived yet. But the first thing the New Testament tells us is that the angels appeared to the shepherds abiding in the fields at Bethlehem and sang a great song of hope to them: "Unto you are great tidings of joy, for unto you is born this day in the city of David, a savior who is Christ the Lord," {cf, Luke 2:10-11}. The promised one appears on the scene. Paul reminds us, in his introduction, that Jesus is the one who was promised beforehand.

When he comes, he is presented to us in two unique ways: first, concerning his human nature, the apostle says he was a descendant of David. Now the actual Greek here is much more blunt and earthy than that. It says he comes of the very sperm of David, emphasizing his intense humanity. We all came that way. We came by the union of sperm and ovum in the miracle of conception, and Jesus came in the same way, through the sperm of David. Thus, his humanity is emphasized and underscored. But secondly, linked with that, is the deity of him who, through the spirit of holiness, was declared with power to be the Son of God. And there Paul begins with that phrase, "the Son of God," that unmistakably declares the deity of our Lord. He was God. Paul will emphasize this many times throughout his letter. But he also stresses the fact that in the uniqueness of his personality he combined together all that was human and all that was divine. And yet, as we will learn in this letter and in other passages of Scripture, he laid aside the exercise of his deity. He didn't come to act as God; he came to act as a man filled with God. This is what is hopeful and helpful to us. If we are called on to act like God, we might as well give up right now. We can't make it. But if we are called on to be men possessed by God, then that is the level on which Christ lived and the level on which we too can live.

That is the heart of the gospel.

This is what God has made it possible for us to do. We can live as he lived and follow his example in that way. Paul will develop these thoughts much more thoroughly in this epistle.

There were three things, Paul says, that marked the deity of Jesus:

First, there was power; he came by power. This is a reference to the miracles that he did, the displays of remarkable power that he manifested among men. These miracles were a sign that he was the man of God, the man fully indwelt and possessed by God.

Second, he came by the spirit of holiness. I've always been concerned about this word *holiness* because I find people misunderstand it so. We don't like the word holy. We think of it as something that is bad -- good, but bad. We don't like to be called holy ourselves. When we say somebody is a "holy Joe" we are using a term of disparagement. And yet it is a great word. I think its meaning can be recaptured for us if we will use a similar term that comes from the same root, the word *wholeness*. Paul is saying that when Jesus came, he was a whole person. He demonstrated whole humanity -- humanity as it was intended to be, exactly. And that is how we are called to live. We are called to be whole persons. The glory of the good news is that God's goal for us is to make us whole, so that we are capable, able to cope, able to handle life, to walk through the midst of the pressures and the turmoils and the tragedies of this world and be able to handle them -- whole persons -- holy persons. That wholeness is what Jesus demonstrated.

The third great mark of Jesus' deity was the resurrection; his deity was authenticated "by his resurrection from the dead." That is where our faith ultimately rests. We can have confidence that God has told us the truth by the unshakable fact that he raised Jesus from the dead. No one can remove that fact from the annals of history. It happened, our faith rests on it, and whenever anybody pursues you and tries to shake your faith, ask them to explain the resurrection. Ask them what they do with it -- because it cannot be explained away. It is the unshakable fact through which God has broken into our time, and he rests the whole story upon that great fact. This, too, will be explored further in this letter.

Now, in the literal order of this letter, the apostle says much about the Roman Christians. And what he says about them also applies to us. In Verses 6-7, he says, and you also are among those "who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. 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."

First, Paul says the Roman Christians, the saints, are *called*. This word *called* is an adjective, not a verb. We are not self-made saints, we are not man-made saints; we are called saints. God called us. Now, every one of us can tell a different story of how it happened -- how God's voice was heard, how you felt the drawing, the pulling of God's spirit in your life. You were called that way. This is true of every Christian. It reveals a remarkable thing: God sought us! We really didn't seek him -- we thought we did, but he sought us. That is why Jesus said to his disciples, "All that the Father has given me will come unto me, and him who comes unto me I will never cast out," {cf, John 6:37}. And thus we came, called of God, sought of God.

The remarkable thing about that calling is underscored here by these words of Paul's: "We are loved by God." Paul always starts out on the basis of God's love for us. He may have to scold these saints he is writing to, he may have to correct them, he may have to speak very sharply to some of them; but he always starts out by reminding them they are loved by God.

Paul understands that this is the fundamental relationship we have with God. He loves us. That is a fact we ought to remind ourselves of every day, as I am sure these Roman Christians did. The grace and peace God gives to his saints is proof of his love for them. The word *grace* stands for all the empowerment and enrichment that God can give; all that he is able to pour into human life, We don't earn grace, but it is given to us in terms of our daily needs. All those moments when strength and courage are infused into our lives, when we are discouraged and God's word comforts and heals us -- that is God's grace. And the result is *peace*, rest! Grace and peace are our inheritance as Christians. These two things ought to characterize Christians everywhere, all the time, so that we live differently before the world. That is the inheritance we can draw upon and reckon on.

Paul points out a second characteristic about the Roman Christians in Verse 8:

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. {Rom 1:8 NIV}

Notice that it was the faith of the Roman Christians that was being talked about -- not the number of buses that they operated or the size or cost of the organ, or the size or cost of the building in which they met. It was the faith of these Christians that startled the Roman world. These were vital Christians. Now a clue as to why that was true is given in the next thing Paul says.

God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you. {Rom 1:9-10 NIV}

Their faith was reported all over the world because the apostle and other Christians were praying for them.

Now Paul had never been to Rome, had never met these people. He had met some of them elsewhere, but he had never known many of them. He prayed for them, he prayed for them constantly! "How constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times." That is why this church flourished. If there is one thing that I would say we need more than anything else today, it is to recover again this sense of concern and prayer for one another. I am as guilty as the rest of you in not doing this. But I think it would make all the difference in the world if we began to uphold each other in prayer regularly.

The third characteristic about the Roman saints that Paul points out is that they were strengthened by gifts (Verses 11-12):

I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong -- that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. {Rom 1:11-12}

NIV}

That is what makes a congregation strong, the exercise of spiritual gifts in its midst. When Paul says, "I want to impart to you some spiritual gift," he doesn't mean that he has all the gifts in a bag and he goes around like an ecclesiastical Santa Claus doling them out to people wherever he goes. He doesn't mean that. *Impart* really means "share with you." It isn't something Paul gives to them; only the Holy Spirit can give spiritual gifts. Paul wants to share with them the gifts God has given. He wants to minister to them, as they are expected to minister to him with the spiritual gifts that they have; thus they will be mutually strengthened by one another's faith. That is how God wants a church to function -- the saints ministering to each other, building up one another by their faith and sharing and exercising the gifts God has given them.

Next in this logical outline is Paul himself as the great apostle to the Gentiles. God is building a structure with Jesus at the center, then the gospel, then the apostle. It is through the apostle that the Christians are being reached. What does Paul say about himself as an apostle?

In Verse 1, he says he is called and set apart as an apostle. *Called* is used as an adjective again here. Paul is not called to be an apostle -- he is a called apostle. God did the calling. This happened, Paul tells us in Galatians, before he was born. That is when God calls us -- before we are born. This is the wonder of the God we serve. He doesn't have to wait until we appear in human history. He calls us long before we are even conceived, long before our family tree ever began to take shape. Then he sets us apart. Now that is the process of history, and that is what happened to Paul. All the events of Paul's young life, including his training under Gamaliel and his rising up in the group of the Pharisees and his antipathy against the gospel, all this was part of God's process of setting him apart to be an apostle. And when the time came, God pulled the trap door and Paul fell through. He was caught. That is what happens to us all; that is the way God works in our lives.

What is an apostle? Paul tells us in Verse 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," or, more literally, "the obedience of faith." An apostle is to call people out. As Paul himself tells us in Verse 14,

I am obligated both to the Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and foolish. {Rom 1:14 NIV}

Paul had a deep sense of an imperative to tell people the gospel because he knew they desperately needed it.

If you were the sole possessor of a remedy for cancer, would you be quiet about it or would you feel an imperative to share with others the secret? That's what Paul says urged him on -- this constant consciousness that he had the secret of release that people desperately needed.

As an apostle, he journeyed out to carry that secret to them. He tells us how he does this in Verse 9, "God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his son..." Here is a whole-hearted man, single-minded, with his spirit fully engaged in this work. Then he tells us the final step in the process in Verse 15:

That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome. {Rom 1:15 NIV}

If Paul is going to reach the nations, why does he preach the gospel to the Christians at Rome? It is by means of the Christians that the nations are to hear. It is the changes God works in the lives of his people that cause others to begin to take note. That is how evangelism occurs. Paul says, "that is why I want to preach the gospel to you at Rome." Now, by the gospel, Paul does not mean simply explaining how to become a Christian. That is what we often think it means, but that isn't what Paul means here, because these Romans were already Christians. The gospel is all the great facts about humanity and about God that God wants to impart to us and that will enable us to be whole persons.

That, therefore, brings us to the message itself -- the gospel which the apostle will preach to the Christians, and thus reach all the nations. This is what Paul says of the gospel in Verses 16 and 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. For 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." {Rom 1:16-17 NIV}

This quotation from Habakkuk that Paul uses is the Scripture that gripped Martin Luther's heart. Paul says that this is the great fact that he is expounding in the gospel. He is not ashamed of it, he says, and that is a way of saying that he is proud of it. He can't wait to get to Rome.

Paul especially is not ashamed of the gospel in Rome because the Romans appreciated power, just as Americans do. The Romans prided themselves on their power. They had military power that could conquer all the nations that stood in their path; they had a tremendous program of road-building; they had some of the greatest law-makers of history; they had the power to write literature and create art. But Paul knew that the Romans also were powerless when it came to changing hearts. They were powerless to eliminate slavery; half of the population of the Roman Empire were slaves. They were powerless to change the stubborn, hostile, hateful hearts of men and eliminate violence; the Roman Empire was full of violence and corruption and the suicide rate was extremely high. The Romans could do nothing about these things. And Paul says that is why he is so proud of the gospel -- because it is the power of God to do those very things that men cannot do. We never need to apologize for the gospel. It is absolutely without rival.

This week I received a letter from Dr. Richard Halvorson, pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church in Washington, D. C. He wrote about a book by Charles Colson, one of the men who went to prison in the Watergate scandal. Dr. Halvorson said this book is the story of the conversion of Charles Colson -- how he became a Christian. Halvorson said the story is so remarkable it can only be compared with the conversion of the Apostle Paul. It is so drastic and so different that even today people struggle with accepting and believing it. But he said there is no question -- this man is a changed man. Now what got hold of his heart and changed him like that? The gospel of the blessed God -- the good news about Jesus Christ. It is the power of God to salvation.

Second, Paul is not ashamed of the gospel because it reveals a righteousness from God. Righteousness is an old word that we don't understand very much. I would like to substitute for it the word *worth*, a worth before God. A sense of acceptance before God is given to you. You can't earn it, you certainly don't deserve it, but it is given. God really accepts you because of the gospel, because of the good news of the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf. Therefore, it is something that you, or I, or anybody else can have, and it is complete, perfect. That is what Paul is going to be talking about throughout the book of Romans -- the gospel of God.

The last thing Paul says is that this righteousness is received by faith. It is not something we can ever earn; it is something we can take anytime we need it, and that is good news. Our worth before God is not something we receive once, by faith, at the beginning of our Christian lives. It is something we remind ourselves of every time we feel depressed, despairing, discouraged, defeated, etc. God has loved us, restored us, and we have perfect standing in his sight. He already accepts us and loves us as much as he possibly can; nothing more can be added to it. That is the righteousness that is revealed in the gospel, by faith, to all who believe, no matter what their background or training may be.

These are the great themes of Romans.

As we go through this book together, I hope these themes will have their effect upon our hearts as they had an effect upon the hearts of many in the first century church.

Prayer

Our Heavenly Father, as we come now to celebrate the Lord's supper, we pray that we may understand again what this means to us -- how hopeless, how dark and bitter our condition would be were it not for the gospel of the grace of God. How thoroughly we would be enmeshed in evil and how deeply we would be involved in horrendous and hurtful things were it not for the intervention of the gospel of the grace of God. Keep us, Father, from

vainly imagining that we have arrived at this stage of deliverance, even the deliverance we now experience by ourselves. Help us to know that nothing could have saved us from the wicked machinations of the evil one had it not been for the intervention of the gospel of grace. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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