

Introduction to the book of Romans 1-8: *rebellion and grace*

An opening story

In Italy, in the year 386 AD, a man from North Africa, who was a Professor of Rhetoric at the University of Milan, sat weeping in a friend's garden. He had a brilliant mind, but his lifestyle was completely immoral. Back in Africa, his mother Monica was praying for him constantly, but so far her prayers remained unanswered. And his friend in Milan, had just been pleading with him to give up his drunkenness and his sinful way of life and to turn over a new leaf. But the young man felt powerless to turn over a new leaf. What he needed was a new life! And so he sat weeping in the garden.

And as he sat there on this summer's day, he heard a child in a nearby garden singing in Latin, "Take up and read! Take up and read!" Feeling a divine nudge, the man found a book next to him that had been left there by his friend. The book happened to be a Bible, and it was open at chapter 13 of Paul's letter to the Romans. As he glanced down the page his eyes were drawn to verses 13 and 14: *Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.*

The man was suddenly confronted with his own sin and his need for God's forgiveness. And at that very moment his mother's prayers were answered, as the man turned to Christ. He later wrote: *"I had no desire, no need to read further. In the instant that sentence ended, it was as if a peaceful light shone in my heart and all the darkness of doubt vanished."*

His name: Aurelius Augustine, and he later became known as Saint Augustine – one of the most famous Christians since the Apostle Paul himself. Augustine's brilliant mind was now used to study the word of God. He became a renowned theologian. Much of what he wrote – and he wrote over a hundred books – shaped the life and thinking of the church for centuries after his conversion.

An amazing book

Hello everyone. My name's Chris Keith. I'm a KYB leader and it's my privilege to be presenting this introduction to Paul's letter to the Romans. In this study we'll be looking at the first eight chapters of Romans. A later study will cover chapters 9 to 16.

Romans is an amazing book. It's actually written in the form of a very long letter and historically, it's probably been one of the most influential books in the New Testament. We know of course that all the Bible is 'God-breathed' and inspired by the Holy Spirit,¹ yet God has chosen to particularly use this letter to shape the history of his church. In fact, it's been said that almost all the revivals and the great awakenings in church history can be linked in some way to the book of Romans.

¹ 2 Timothy 3:16

We've just heard about St Augustine in the 4th century. Did you know that in the 16th century Martin Luther was converted through the book of Romans? Luther, a German Monk, was weighed down with the burden of his sin and he felt there was no way he could ever perform enough good deeds to outweigh all his wrong deeds. But as he read through Romans, God opened his eyes to see the grace of God: that he could be counted as righteous, right with God, simply by putting his faith in Jesus Christ.

Martin Luther is credited with starting the Protestant Reformation, a movement that brought the wayward church back to the word of God.

John Wesley, who led the great Christian revival in Britain in the 18th century, came to Christ through hearing Martin Luther's introduction to the book of Romans.

And some of you may have heard of the 20th century English minister, John Stott, a great evangelist, a wonderful preacher and the writer of many theological books. John Stott was also converted through reading the book of Romans.

And there are many others who can talk about the impact Romans has had on their lives. Perhaps some of you can say: *"It was through the book of Romans that I too came to Christ"*. And personally, I can testify that the book of Romans has been very significant in shaping my Christian life. So we're about to study a very important letter.

Why is Romans so significant? Well you see Romans is centred on the gospel. And the gospel tells us how sinful people – and that's all of us – can be made right with a holy God. How sinful people can be saved from God's condemnation. And, although the whole Bible shows God's unfolding plan of salvation, in this letter, Paul systematically sets out the most closely argued and thorough explanation of what the gospel is all about. And we find it is all about Jesus. The gospel is not about me. The gospel is God's gospel – he planned it before the foundation of the world, and he promised it throughout all of the Old Testament. One day, he promised, he would send the Messiah to save his people.

Listen to the first four verses of this letter:

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 earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.²

A motivated author

Now as we've just heard, Paul is an apostle – a sent one – who was set apart for the gospel of God. Paul is a motivated author. It seems almost impossible that a proud Jewish man named Saul, who once breathed out murderous threats against the followers of Jesus, should become God's chosen instrument to proclaim the gospel of Jesus to the Gentiles³ – those who weren't Jewish. Yet with God nothing is impossible! No one is beyond the reach of God's saving power.

² Romans 1:1-4;

³ Acts 9:15-16

One day when Saul was travelling to Damascus to seek out Jesus' followers and take them as prisoners to Jerusalem, Saul met the risen Lord Jesus.⁴ And he was soundly converted. In a God-inspired, 180-degree turn, he straight away started proclaiming that Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah.

Now we don't know much about what Saul did for a number of years after his conversion. However, around 47 AD this man, now known as Paul, set out with his companions, to preach the gospel and establish churches across the Roman Empire. Rather than persecuting those who followed Jesus, Paul was now motivated to preach Jesus to everyone. And he wanted to go to places where no one else had taken the gospel.

In around 57 AD Paul was nearing the end of his third missionary journey. He was in Corinth in Greece, staying in the house of a wealthy man named Gaius. Paul had collected money from the churches he'd visited to take to the believers in Jerusalem and Judea who were in poverty due to the severe persecution they were suffering. Paul planned to personally take these gifts to Jerusalem, before going on to Rome.⁵

Paul wrote the Letter to the Romans while he was still in Corinth.⁶ He'd arranged for Phoebe, a deacon in the nearby church at Cenchreae, to carry the letter to the believers in Rome.⁷ He wanted them to read this letter before he came in person.

For some time Paul had been eager to go to Rome and preach the gospel there.⁸ However, he didn't plan to stay there long, as a church had already been established in Rome. He just wanted to make a fairly brief stopover in the capital of the Roman Empire, before taking the gospel further west to Spain, where no one else had gone before. He was hoping that the believers in Rome would support him in this missionary endeavour – both in prayer and probably financially as well.

It seems however, that not all the believers in Rome knew a lot about the Apostle Paul. So he takes some time to write them a letter to establish his credentials. In one sense this is Paul's way of introducing himself to the believers in Rome before he visits. So he sets out at the beginning of the letter who he is. Then he clearly sets out the message that he preaches. At that time there were many false preachers around, so Paul wanted to ensure that the believers in Rome did not doubt that what he preached was the true gospel of God.

And in writing this letter, Paul has left us with an amazing legacy that tells us what the gospel is all about.

A mixed audience

Well let's look now at the believers in Rome at that time. Now we know from the number of people Paul greets in chapter 16 of Romans, that he already knew quite a few of the Christians in Rome. However, because he'd never been to Rome, Paul obviously did not start this church. Nor is there any evidence for it being started by any other apostle. In fact we really don't know how it started.

⁴ Acts 9:1-6

⁶ Acts 20:2; Romans 16:23

⁸ Romans 1:13-15

⁵ 1 Corinthians 16:2-4

⁷ Romans 16:1-2

However, we do know that there were Christians in Rome soon after the Day of Pentecost, the day when the gift of the Holy Spirit was given to the church. We're told in Acts 2:10 that among the thousands of people in Jerusalem for the Festival of Pentecost, there were 'visitors from Rome'. So it's probable that Jews from Rome were among the three thousand people who were converted when Peter preached on that memorable occasion. And these Jews would have taken the gospel back to Rome and started the church there.

So the church in Rome was at first made up of Jews who had turned to Christ. However, as they shared the good news about Jesus with their friends, Gentiles were converted, and they too became a part of the church in Rome.

However, during the reign of the Emperor Claudius, disturbances arose among the forty to fifty thousand Jews who were living in Rome at that time. These disturbances were started over arguments about someone called 'Chrestus' – most likely a reference to Christ. And the arguments were probably over whether Jesus Christ was indeed Israel's promised Messiah. But Claudius was not going to tolerate any civil disturbances in his city, so in 49 AD he ordered all the Jews in Rome to leave. So the Jewish believers in Rome, along with all the other Jews, were forced to leave the city and go to live in other parts of the Roman Empire. Among those who were expelled were Aquila and Priscilla, who were tentmakers, and who Paul met in Corinth. And you can read about them in Acts chapter 18.

Back in Rome the young church was now made up entirely of Gentile believers, who did not have a background in the Jewish Scriptures – our Old Testament. But these believers were faithful in proclaiming the gospel, and over the next few years this church grew in number. However, when Claudius died in 54 AD, Nero became emperor, and the edict Claudius had made expelling the Jews was abandoned. So the Jewish exiles began to return home.

This meant that the church in Rome was now made up of Gentile and Jewish believers. And the Jewish Christians who had started the church, were now returning to a largely Gentile group of believers. And it appears that there may have been some tension between these two groups. So throughout this letter, Paul seeks to show that both Jews and Gentiles have rebelled against God. Both Jews and Gentiles are under God's condemnation. Both Jews and Gentiles deserve God's wrath. The Jews had God's law, but they couldn't keep it perfectly. So they were not superior to the Gentiles. Both Jews and Gentiles needed to come to Christ to be saved by faith.

A life-changing message

Paul, a Jew, was living proof of the power of the gospel to change lives. And if you want a couple of key verses for Romans, then I suggest chapter 1 verses 16 and 17, where Paul says:

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

The gospel is often explained as 'good news'. And it certainly is 'good news'. But the truth is, before we can receive the *good* news of God, we must first understand the *bad* news.

So in chapter 1:18-19 Paul goes on to write:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.

Like Martin Luther, we must all realise that it's not enough to do good deeds to try and make up for all the wrong things we've done. Trying to keep God's law does not work; turning over a new leaf does not work. Why? Because by nature we are all sinful people. Our constant inclination is to rebel against our Creator. Sin is rebellion against the One who made us. And sin earns God's wrath; sin earns death.

And God himself is the only one who can change us. So he graciously gives to those who come to him by faith a free gift, a gift that can't be earned in any way – the gift of life, eternal life. And that, in fact, is the way it has always been. Way back in Genesis we're told: *Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.*⁹

Romans 6:23 says:

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

When Jesus died on the cross he took the punishment we deserve for all our sin, all our rebellion. And when we realise this, and come to him by faith, God graciously gives us the righteousness of Jesus. The first part of Romans 3:22 says

This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

Salvation is by grace alone – we don't deserve it. It's received through faith alone – we can't earn it. And it's found in Christ alone – no one else. No one else was perfect, no one else was sinless. No one else could be the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. Jesus died so that we could walk in newness of life, loving and serving God and bringing glory to his name.

In chapter 8 of Romans, Paul makes the outcome of the gospel clear: those who are in Christ Jesus will never come under the condemnation of God.¹⁰ We have been set free. We are his adopted children, led by his Spirit, given the privilege of calling him 'Abba, Father'. We are his heirs.¹¹ And God's purpose is to work everything out for our good, as he subdues our rebellion and seeks to shape and mould us into the likeness of his perfect Son, Jesus.¹²

What a glorious future awaits us! We don't deserve it, it's all of grace, but it is ours if we are in Christ Jesus. As we do this study, let's rejoice in the goodness and greatness of our God, who saves rebellious people by his grace and who assures us that nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate us from his love.

Let's pray. Thank you Lord, that *'neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'*¹³
Amen.

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⁹ Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3

¹¹ Romans 8:14-17

¹³ Romans 8:38-39

¹⁰ Romans 8:1

¹² Romans 8:28-29