

Romans 1:1-7: An Introduction to Romans

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 06 May 2007

Preacher: David Helm

[0 : 00] Today is taken from the book of Romans, chapter 1, verses 1 through 7. This can be found in the Pew Bibles on page 913. Again, the scripture text is Romans, chapter 1, 1 through 7, on page 913 of the Pew Bibles.

Please stand for the reading of God's Word. Amen.

Well, today we commence a series of sermons in the book of Romans, and I am excited about that. It is a book of unparalleled importance to our understanding of the Christian faith. It is a book of unprecedented influence upon the Christian church.

And so, as we enter in, we need to be introduced both to its influence and importance, as well as the verses before us as they introduce the very text.

[2 : 15] As to its historical influence, the letter of Paul to the Romans is the mountain peak which rises above all other peaks in the range of New Testament literature.

Without Romans, the way we speak about Christian doctrine would be limited to the valleys and the plains. As to its importance, Romans is that long shadow spreading out behind every significant person and event from the time of its writing until now.

That is no overstatement. Every great personage, every great movement of the gospel, from the time these words were first read until now, are what they are because and through a deep, personal, intimate acquaintance with Romans.

It was this letter that brought Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, to Christ, shaping the very form of faith and life in every century since.

Some of you will be familiar with his own reflections on the role that Romans played at the time of his confession in the fall of 386. He writes, I heard from a neighboring house a voice, as of boy or girl.

[3 : 53] I love that because we expect him to be somewhere in the age of 33 when he first becomes a Christian. I know not, chanting, oft repeating, take up and read, take up and read.

I arose, interpreting it to be no other than a command from God to open the book and read the first chapter that I should find. I seized, opened, and in silence read that section on which my eyes first fell.

Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envy, but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ and make not provision for the flesh.

Romans, chapter 13, verses 13 and 14. He writes, No further would I read, nor needed I, for instantly at the end of this sentence, by a light as if it were of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away.

And forget not, it was Augustine's reading of Romans 5, years later, that gave articulation to the doctrine of original sin, a way of thinking and speaking about the human condition, all the way to the present day.

[5 : 15] Romans. It also stands behind the conversion of Martin Luther. He writes, I had greatly longed to understand Paul's letter 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.

Therefore, I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. End quote.

Is it any wonder then that Paul's letter to the Romans should become the soil for the Reformation?

Think of it. No Romans, no Reformation. And as a consequence, no defending control of all Christian Protestant thought for nearly 500 years.

Until recently, in the last generation. Those ideas under reconsideration. Of Romans, William Tyndale, who in 1526 was the first to publish his translated Greek New Testament into English, wrote, For as much as this epistle is the principal and most excellent part of the New Testament, and the most pure euangelion, or gospel, or good news, no man verily can read it too oft or study it too well.

[6 : 54] And later, it was this letter that was instrumental in the birth, the new birth, of John Wesley, thereby propelling with some irresistible force the great awakening of the 18th century.

Wesley's May 24th, 1738 journal gives us the significance of Romans this way, quote, In the evening, I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate where one was reading Luther's preface to the epistle to the Romans.

About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change that 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 salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

Romans. It's the very book that becomes the great theological battleground between Wesley and Whitefield on the nature of God's work in salvation.

[8 : 07] Nearly a hundred years on from the great awakening, Samuel Coleridge, who was not only a poet, but an Anglican theologian, a philosopher, and the son of a pastor, would write, I think that the epistle to the Romans is the most profound work in existence, and I hardly believe that the writings of the old Stoics, now lost, could have been deeper.

And what student of the 20th century can forget the uneasy upheaval caused by Karl Barth's commentary on the Romans, in which he turned the prevailing theological discussion on its head with the notion, quote, the epistle to the Romans is a revelation of the unknown God.

God chooses to come to man, not man to God. God, and just when you might begin to think that the flame of the letter has got to be spent, the Dead Sea Scrolls lighted up the sky, they emerged from a cool, dark place, who would have guessed that they carried in them enough fuel to keep the fires of Romans burning for another hundred years?

In the 1970s, E.P. Sanders blew his Second Temple thoughts upon the ancient embers. They were followed in the early 80s with Jimmy Dunn's fresh new perspective that challenged all traditional understandings to that point since the Reformation.

And early from the 90s until the present day, N.T. Wright's prolific pages in concert with a host of others up until now have become an endless source of energy for Romans to press its influence and its importance upon the church for another hundred, two hundred, I dare say even thousand years.

[10 : 11] And with that backdrop, Paul's letter to the Romans arrives in the midst of Holy Trinity Church in the year 2011.

This letter that we possess in all of its glorious magnificence of two thousand years of Christian thought and life, faith, and practice, yours!

Romans! What a letter! What a treasure! What a pleasure! What a year! opening up before us! I wouldn't miss church for a million dollars!

And I mean it. This book, I've been reading privately for decades with this confidently held promise that I will refrain from preaching it until I turn at least 50.

for fear that I will approach it before I have even the smallest measure of maturity to meet its magnificence now comes.

[11 : 31] For in April of this year, I turn 50. And I'm going to be in Romans. And I cannot express my happiness at the pleasure of spending this year in this letter with you.

Today, we begin with what is, in the Greek, one long introductory sentence. We know it in our Bible as chapter 1, 1 to 7.

And as we come to the text now in earnest, I would like the words of John Calvin to be given pride of place while beginning his own sermon series on Paul's letter to the Romans to his congregation. He commented, quote, when one gains a knowledge of this epistle, he has an entrance open to him to all the most hidden treasures of the Scriptures.

I like that. Come in through the doorway of Romans and you enter in upon the most hidden treasures of the Bible.

[12 : 44] Today, I'm going to introduce you to three of them. The first of which is the consequence of verse 1. The hidden treasure?

God's ways. God chooses to reveal himself and his plans for human history through the agency of specially selected people.

In this case, through Paul. God has something to say to the world and he says it through a handful of particularly chosen people.

In other eras, he spoke through Abraham or Moses, David, and Isaiah. But in this letter, Paul, God, is at work for us through Paul.

Now, as we get into the letter a little bit, you're going to come to notice that Paul has very little to say about himself in this letter. This is not like reading the Corinthian or the Galatian correspondence.

[13 : 52] As one acquaintance said to me, after all, when Paul writes a lot about himself, it tends to get him in trouble. So, even though Paul is trying to introduce himself to the Roman congregation with this letter, he falls immediately to the backdrop.

the hidden treasure of verse 1, then, is not Paul. Not Paul as the subject, but the truth about God and how he chooses to reveal himself to humanity through his mysterious selection of one person among many persons.

Christians. This is that first treasure that he wants the church at Rome to know, which is why the emphasis of verse 1 should rightly fall on the three clauses that stand in relationship to Paul, not Paul.

Look at them. Put your eyes on them. Paul, one, servant. Two, call. Three, set apart. That's the emphasis. Paul, servant of Christ Jesus, called apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.

This is how God reveals himself to humanity. He took a person named Saul who was just living out his life, going about his business in the academy and otherwise.

[15 : 23] And he takes him for his own. and that most uncanny appearance on the Damascus road.

It wasn't as if Saul took a career placement test and he scored high in biblical literacy and therefore signed on to be an apostle and a preacher of the gospel because he had been trained for it.

No! He was called to it! That's the force of the phrase. He remains hemmed in to it.

That's the force of set apart. He never planned on it. He never chose it. But now called, sent. Now set apart, hemmed in for life.

In Galatians he speaks of being called and put apart in this very way. Galatians chapter 1 verses 11 and following for I would have you know brothers that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel for I did not receive it from any man nor was I taught it but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ for you have heard of my former life in Judaism how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my own people so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers but when he who had set me apart before I was born same phrase as Romans 1 and who called me by his grace was pleased to reveal his son to me in order that I might preach him among the

[17 : 17] Gentiles I did not immediately consult with anyone when was called when was Paul called set apart he says in Galatians he was set apart before he was born this is the mystery of the gospel the truth of all biblical literature that God who is beyond us in in Bart's words unknowable even condescends to select people and to communicate his very word to them and he put them in human history that the world might know who he is Paul not in charge servant Paul not trained and capable call Paul not able to go my own way and do whatever I want hemmed in the mystery of

God's ways well what does that mean for us it certainly means that we need to recognize throughout this letter that God is above us it ought to grow your appreciation that he's willing to condescend through words that can be read by us that he has given himself to us in human language and ultimately in human form through his son that we might be united to him what does it mean what should that do what's that do for you on Monday morning well it's indescribable the truth is uncontainable from the highest of heights to the depth of the sea creation revealing your majesty who is told every lightning bolt where it should go or seen heavenly storehouses laden with snow who imagine the sun and give source to it light yet conceals it to bring us the coolness of night none can fathom you are amazing

God all powerful untameable the book of Romans the first great hidden truth the great treasure God's ways I think of a friend here in the congregation wanted his colleague to come to an understanding of the gospel I had a friend in from London that my friend thought would be able to communicate well with this man and so he asked us if we'd go out to lunch and we did downtown four of us at table my friend from London said to the man's friend so have you ever read the Bible no I haven't have you ever read Mark no I haven't do you have any interest in reading Mark no not really he said well if you want to come into a relationship with God you have to read what he says because he communicates to us who he is through these particularly selected people that's why he did it and getting to know

God is like getting to know anybody else you have to sit down and listen to them and get to know them would you be interested in reading Mark no I would not fine pass the salt please discussion over why because my friend from London realized that this man had not yet come to a place where he would be able to understand who God is because he speaks through the words of specially selected people long ago now written down the second hidden treasure of Paul's long opening sent and moves beyond God's ways to God's gospel God is ultimately concerned to make himself fully known through the gospel which is nothing less than the good news of his son take a look look at the force of those three words that I gave you in verse one that are standing in apposition to the name of Paul served called set apart they are moving toward this final crescendoing phrase of the gospel of God this gospel is what

Paul will define for you in verses two through four this gospel is what leads Paul's life in mission verses five and six this gospel is what best describes his service to God verse nine this gospel is what he is eager to speak about when he gets to Rome verse fifteen this gospel is one that he has no reason to be ashamed of verse sixteen for as you will see in two weeks time this gospel is the power of God for salvation to all who will believe and this gospel is the righteousness from God of God revealed this gospel is what he will unfold throughout the whole letter this gospel is what he concludes with in his benediction of chapter sixteen twenty-five to twenty-seven this gospel let me put it this way what Paul would have you know is that the gospel of Jesus Christ as unfolded in the book of

[23 : 03] Romans is the crown jewel among the vast pile of previously hidden away treasures in the Bible do you remember having anyone ever read you Lewis's The Hobbit where he gave us Bilbo coming upon smog that fiery dragon who dwelt under the mountain I mean here's Bilbo of the shire entering into this cavernous room of treasures that were stolen and hoarded well he puts it this way there he lay a vast red golden dragon fast asleep a thrumming came from his jaws and nostrils and wisps of smoke but his fires were low in slumber beneath him under all his limbs and his huge coiled tail and about him on all sides stretching away from the unseen floors lay countless piles of precious things gold wrought and unwrought gems and jewels and silver red stained in the ruddy light smog lay with wings folded like an immeasurable bat turned partly on one side so that the hobbit could see his underparts and his long pale belly crusted with gems and fragments of gold from his long lying on his costly bed great jars vessels filled with a wealth that could not be guessed to say that

Bilbo's breath was taken away is no description at all there are no words left to express his staggerment since men changed the language that they learned of elves in the day when all the world was wonderful Bilbo had heard tell and sing of dragon hordes before but the splendor the lust the glory of such treasure never had yet come home to him his heart was filled and pierced with enchantment and with the desire of dwarves and he gazed motionless almost forgetting the frightful guardian at the gold beyond price and count the gospel is an alluring treasure like that Romans is a book that will present it in all its lusty glory and we are the happy hobbits who have the pleasure of dancing upon the pile for a year because there's no dragon to keep us from it hark good news the choice treasure among all the treasures of the bible obtain the gospel and the rest is yours as well do you ever feel that way about the gospel take a look for yourself at

Paul's definition of it he unfolds it in this sentence in terms of three clauses verse two ending in one person three a who himself is summarized with two participial phrases three b through four three clauses one person two phrases and the clauses which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures now the problem with that word promise beforehand as it's translated it looks static but the word actually will resurface again the stem of it will resurface in verse eight where it talks about their faith being proclaimed in all the world so it would be better to say which he

pre preached see that's active the gospel was as one has said pre proclaimed through prophets his prophets

God's prophets in their sermons and texts now written down in holy writ the gospel of God has been pre proclaimed long before Paul came upon this road to Damascus the gospel was pre proclaimed actively at work through his prophets in the writings now set down I mean it almost supports verse one doesn't it that when when you give yourself to reading and understanding you're listening when you read the Bible you are listening to the very proclamation of God's specially selected ones in this case the prophets who reveal to you God's way in the world and where is it all moving where was their proclamation all going to one person 3a concerning his son so the way the text looks he says he's set apart for the gospel of God what is the gospel of God concerning his son and you'll see in a couple of verses later he names him

Jesus Christ our Lord that's the logic of the text the gospel of God concerns his son who is none other than Jesus Christ our Lord one person look at in this one sentence the emphasis of Christ it is so Christ centered verse one he's a servant of Christ Jesus verse three concerning his son verse four Jesus Christ our Lord verse five for the sake of his name verse six including all you who belong of Jesus Christ verse seven grace to you from the Lord Jesus Christ Paul giving you Romans gives you Jesus he gives you the gospel he gives you the greatest gem and crown jewel of everything contained in all the writings of holy writ so how do we how do we apply this well look the way he describes him he moves from its person to these two phrases that kind of capture

[30 : 21] Jesus at both ends of his life verse four sorry verse three descended from David according to the flesh verse four declared the son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead descended according to the flesh declared or more rightly understood because it's not this proclamation end but determined it was therefore determined in power by his resurrection from the dead that this one Jesus is the son of God he is God's son he is the Lord takes his birth all the way through his death up to!

his gathers the whole of history I mean eternal history if there can be such a thing and he gave it to you there with two phrases you have a year to ponder and meditate on Jesus if we're to put the gospel back at the center of church life it will mean nothing less than putting Jesus upon the pedestal for all to see the gospel Jesus is going to be everything to you from the moment you were descended according to the flesh to the moment that you will give up your life and stand before him he is everything you need songwriters put it better when ends life's transient dream when death cold sullen stream shall o'er me roll savior then in love fear and distrust remove oh bear me up above this ransomed soul the gospel you don't need anything else the third hidden treasure of the text by way of introducing the themes that we're going to be living in throughout the book moves beyond

God's mysterious ways which we'll see unfolded throughout the letter and God's gospel to what I would call the gospel's goal it's the third hidden treasure this gospel is running with irresistible force to the ends of the earth and it possesses divine intention and purpose look at verses five and six through whom notice the antecedent to that we're no longer speaking of the gospel and all the things that it is through whom we're now speaking of Jesus Jesus himself through whom Paul and the apostles received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations including you also who are called to belong to Jesus Christ to those who are in Rome this gospel is moving with a goal with irrefutable force to the nations among whom the

Romans are just part of that path now the emphasis that I want you to see on the obedience of faith first is its focus the gospel's goal is a global goal among the nations even as he has come to you who dwell in Rome look back to the word dunamis or power he was declared something in power the whole nature of dynamite the whole thing of the gospel is the fact that it's going like this to the ends of the earth that's what he wants you to know it almost is eating up roadway that's paved all the way to the end Rome is only the pivot in the ministry enterprise of the apostle Paul you're going to see that he's basically going to say to them look this gospel is so big and its extent is so global but everything from the east of you

I'm done with I've been there I've done that and you are the doorway to everything west in Spain and I'm going there why because the gospel is going to the ends of the earth that's the gospel goal it's actually come all the way to Hyde Park 2011 it'll go beyond us it'll run over you or you will allow it to run over you that is the gospel's goal the obedience of faith this is a phrase that we're going to be

in all year I don't feel like I have to unpack it all today but it's a difficult one I mean is the emphasis on your obedience as the fruit of faith or is the emphasis on obedience namely one's faith hey I got a year come back the ins and outs of faith we're going to be here for a year what does it mean how do you get it how do you hold on to it what are the implications of it that's

[36 : 20] Romans he's introducing you to one of the great treasures of the book so how do I apply it this third point there is one gospel of God the gospel has one goal namely it's a global goal nothing less than at least we can say this today it demands global obedience the obedience of faith and I would say therefore if we understand this text rightly it should rightly shape every person sitting here and everything we do corporately together you and I ought to give ourselves to the pushing out of this word this gospel everything else ought to be submitted to it we are not here for ourselves we are not here for church growth we exist for gospel growth

I don't care if we don't get any bigger but I would die if we weren't sending this big gospel everywhere with all its resources that God would give to you with all the power that your involvement and volunteer work can muster this gospel is moving that's the great truth of Romans Paul wants nothing less than that from Rome he's going to want them completely on for the expansion of the gospel and he must get there before the final eschatological curtain of God falls in righteous judgment on humanity this whole letter is just pushing into this pulling down of this moment of gospel

I just saw the king's speech yesterday don't miss it at one point they asked the king who eventually advocates the throne what are you doing he says I've been busy kinging I love that what are you doing according to Romans if it penetrates us the way Paul would have it penetrate us there's only one response I'm gospeling that's it I'm gospeling it doesn't mean I leave my job and become another pastor helm no it means wherever you go out of here you are gospeling this gospel to the ends of the earth so he wants to send it around the world look at his great two phrases as he speaks of the congregations in Rome he says they are loved by

God or loved of God and called to be saints God loved them they were called of God just as Paul had his own calling so did the congregation it wasn't to apostleship but it was to be holy to all of those who are in Rome loved by God and called to be saints well today a mere introduction to the three treasures three among many others that will captivate us in the coming months God's ways God's gospel the gospel's goal love the majesty of this letter the irrepressible push and its demands even to the ends of the earth before wrath falls in final form

Romans may it be used of God to fundamentally shift the way we think about life in the world may it shape our life together and all relationships that we have may they fall under these truths may it spark within us a flame that would ignite a passion for the goal of its word going forth and most of all may our year in this book lead us to a heightened celebration of the wonder of our salvation that God would make himself known that apprehending him by faith I am restored and granted forgiveness of sins you know I opened with all this litany of great personages I want to close with the influence of this letter on a common person my grandpa in a letter from

[41 : 43] Canton China June 14 1947 he writes home with these words this morning several came to the train to see me off to Canton we had a pleasant trip by train I spent a good four hours memorizing and reviewing the word is so rich I am again in Romans and praying that if it is his will I will be able to get Romans finished before coming home and possibly one other epistle I am also praying that he will open my understanding that I might fully understand these great great truths may it be so for you and for me our heavenly father we prepare to settle in strengthen us in our knowledge of you and may our love for you grow in Christ's name amen