

Romans contains a grand summary of the Christian faith and a timeless account of reality, of the real world of man in sin and of man in salvation.

“Romans: Introduction”

Romans 1:1-7

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On the last Lord’s Day morning I preached in this pulpit, I completed a series of sermons on the book of Revelation. To that book of 22 chapters, I devoted 36 sermons, the first preached in August of 2008, the last in May of 2009. One of the reasons I have hesitated to tackle Paul’s letter to the Romans through the years of my preaching here has been that the argument is so dense, the letter so crammed with matter of the deepest and most important kind, that I feared its sixteen chapters would devour me. I feared Romans would require the sermons not of one year or two, but of four or five or six.

Martyn Lloyd Jones’ famous series of expositions of Paul’s Letter to the Romans, delivered as sermons to a thousand people on Friday nights at Westminster Chapel in London, were begun in 1955 and when they ended because of Dr. Jones’ illness in 1968, thirteen years and 372 sermons later, the great preacher was only in the middle of chapter 14! I have, of course, preached any number of sermons from Romans through the years, but I have never begun at the beginning with the intention of continuing through to the end and largely for this reason: the prospect is so daunting.

But, my fears notwithstanding, I have come to believe that it is time for us to tackle Romans. It is the only major book of the New Testament that we have not worked our way through. It is, after all, perhaps the most comprehensive statement of the Christian faith provided in any book of the Bible. But I am not going to spend thirteen years preaching through the book. I don’t intend to spend two years. I’m going to approach the book as I have approached many others, paragraph by paragraph, attending in the sermon to what I understand to be Paul’s main point in the paragraph before us. This inevitably means that much in the way of the details of Paul’s argument will be left untouched. But I see no way to find an acceptable middle ground between an examination of the argument in its main points and an exhaustive exposition of one of the most complicated and difficult books in the Bible, a book whose every paragraph is the stuff of legend both for its luminous disclosure of the meaning of life and for its controversy.

Christians, of course, think of Romans as something akin to an outline of the entire Bible: a summation, the marrow of biblical Christianity. The Bible reduced to a single explanation. If anyone wishes to know what the Bible is chiefly about and what the Christian religion is, one has only to read Romans. And there is reason why so many Christians think of Romans in this way. It is the Bible’s most straightforward and comprehensive account from the beginning to end of the faith produced by the most influential and, shall we say it, the most theologically and philosophically sophisticated of Christ’s apostles. There is a reason why William Tyndale should have referred to Romans as “a light and way unto the whole Scripture.” [Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, 67] But it is precisely for this same reason – for the influence and power of the argument of this great letter and for the clear summary of the Christian message that it contains –

that a man like George Bernard Shaw should have said, “It would have been a better world if Paul had never been born.” Shaw would not have said that about any of the Gospel writers or even about Moses or one of the Old Testament prophets. Paul’s exposition of the faith, however, all too clearly includes those parts that many would prefer to do without.

Paul, you see, gives you the Christian faith between the eyes. His is an argument that others have described as “logic on fire.” He is uncompromising in his assertion of the biblical faith – including the parts of it most difficult for people to embrace – and unrelenting in his demonstration of its truthfulness. For those who find Christianity distasteful or offensive – and there have always been many of those and are many today – the Apostle Paul is perhaps their most formidable adversary. People love the stories of the Gospels and imagine that they can fashion from that electrifying history a faith suitable to their own personal preferences. But Paul with the authority of Jesus Christ takes the facts of the Gospel History and fashions from them that consistent system of truth and reality to which men must, however unwilling, submit their minds and hearts *or else*. This has never made Paul a favorite of even the largest mass of so-called Christians, much less the open critics of the Christian faith.

Romans is the revelation and explanation of the true religion, using “religion” in its most important sense of a system of fundamental beliefs about reality. Paul was all about the truth. The word *truth* appears some 50 times in Paul’s letters, with its first of eight appearances in Romans in verse 18 of chapter 1. In v. 25 we have it again in what is perhaps a kind of thesis statement: the problem with man is that he has exchanged the truth of God for a lie. In our day and age, when people have come to struggle with the very idea of truth, truth with a capital T, absolute truth, truth that is true for everyone, truth which all men must accept come wind, come weather, Paul’s argument is like a scalpel slicing away the pettifogging and the evasion that is so common to man’s thinking about the most important things. Paul will have none of this idea of competing truths, of equally acceptable though contrary versions of reality. His exposition of reality in Romans is simply another form of Jesus’ statement that he is the way, the truth, and the life and that no one comes to the Father except through him. Romans, from first to last, is about the way things actually are for everybody!

According to the Apostle Paul, if one wishes to grasp the nature of human reality, one must begin with the fact that *man is a religious person*. He is far more *homo adorans*, worshipping man, a man of belief, a man of conviction, than he is *homo sapiens*, thinking man. He is inescapably religious in the sense that his life is dominated by the hunger for salvation – that is, he cannot help but long for something better –, dominated by some system of ultimate convictions concerning reality, and by an inescapably ethical view of life. Man cannot escape his religious nature because he knows God and has been made in God’s image. There is in him, Paul says, what Calvin would later describe as the *sensus divinitatis*, the sense of the divine. That is simply a fact of human life and it goes a very long way toward explaining human life and human experience as we all observe it.

But, however much a creature made to be like God in certain ways, made for fellowship with God, and with the existence and reality of God stamped upon his soul, *man is also a rebel*. Paul assumes, more than he explains the Fall of man into sin recounted in Genesis 3, although he does discuss the Fall and its consequences briefly in chapter 5, but it is the presupposition of his

famous account of man and man's nature in the opening chapters of the Letter to the Romans. Mankind rebelled against God and is now by nature a community of rebels against the infinite personal God who is his creator. This is the terrible mystery and tragedy of human life: such opportunity squandered; such greatness so thoroughly compromised; such goodness so corrupted. And so man's religious nature must be and will be now expressed in some measure of contradiction: what he was made for he must now repudiate; what he was intended to be he cannot and will not be. God made him to relate to himself but that he will not do. His religious nature cannot be eradicated – this religious impulse in man – so he must express it in another way, in a variety of other ways, but every one of them, as Paul will tell us, a version of the worship of the creature rather than the creator. Worship he must, but not the infinite personal God! Unwilling to admit the truth, he fabricates a contrary reality. He cannot escape his religious nature, but he is determined to express it in ways that do not require him to acknowledge or submit to the infinite, personal God who made him.

As you know, Florence and I have just returned from a trip to the Middle East, your generous gift to us. That part of the world is a manifestly religious place, much, much more so than is Tacoma, Washington. Jerusalem is as religious a city as you will ever see: the sanctuaries of various religions dominating the landscape, the adherents of various faiths expressing their convictions in every conceivable way. Among the Jews we witnessed the prayers at the Western Wall, the distinctive clothing and wearing of hair. In our hotel in Tiberias, there were instructions in one of the two elevators regarding at which floors that particular elevator would stop on the Sabbath; in our room we found instructions for orthodox Jews to be sure to turn the air conditioning on before the Sabbath began.

Among the Muslims there was a different sort of dress. The wife of the operator of our hotel was an English convert to Islam and wore clothing that covered everything but her face; black robes and a head piece; even her hands were covered with black gloves and this for the sake of her new religion. She was herself a walking affirmation and testimony to Islam. The men all went bearded. We were awakened early in the morning by the call to prayer blared over the loudspeaker high up on the minarets of the old city. We saw Muslim shopkeepers interrupting their work, bowing on their prayer rugs to say their five-times a day prayer toward Mecca. And what of the Christians? At the shrines, especially at what is supposed to be the site of the Lord's crucifixion and his burial, both within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, as well as at the traditional site of his birth in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, Christians of various sects would kneel down and kiss the place where the great events are supposed to have occurred. Or at the Jordan River, near where it leaves the Sea of Galilee, they came in droves to be baptized again, in some cases, for the umpteenth time. One can rent the white garment to be baptized in right there at the ticket booth!

I was chased out of one Orthodox church, the one that sits on what some claim to have been the hillside on which the Lord Jesus preached his Sermon on the Mount. What was my crime? I was wearing shorts. A little Italian nun, in high dudgeon, ran me out, hissing after me, "This is a holy place!" The church, by the way, was built by Mussolini in 1937! (No comments after the sermon, by the way, to the effect that you completely understand the poor nun and you too would have found unholy the sight of me in shorts.)

For a great many people of our world *this* is religion. This is the way to God; the way to salvation and to eternal life. It consists in such outward acts of pious devotion and conformity to some outward code of ritual conduct. So it was in Paul's day. There were a great many, both Jew and Gentile alike, whose understanding of religion centered on the performance of a set of rituals and the meeting of a set of religious norms. Paul's Letter to the Romans is one powerful protest against this understanding of religion, of salvation, and of man's relationship to God. For Paul all of this is only more illustration of the way man exchanges the truth of God for a lie. But this is only one way in which man does this.

Paul knew very well that there were other forms of false religion and other forms of religious rebellion against God. Religion is universal among mankind and so is the religious nature of man's rebellion against God. Many unbelievers today claim that they are without religion, that they reject the very idea of salvation or ultimate truth. But Paul lays bare the dishonesty of this claim. A modern secularist or even atheist is, in this sense, just as religious as any practitioner of the pious rituals of the world's great faiths. He too has a system of ultimate beliefs and convictions that shape his understanding of reality and the practice of his life. He too has longings that are the echo of his knowledge of God and of God's perfect world. He cannot escape his religious nature no matter how hard he tries. The modern atheist assumes and certainly claims that his convictions are based on reason alone, that they owe nothing to any god or to any belief in god, but it is manifestly not true. The fact is no modern school of philosophy today argues that reason can justify a person's morality, that morality that is the very definition of everyone's understanding of himself and his personhood can be somehow or another explained and justified by simply thinking the matter through. Since Immanuel Kant through Friedrich Nietzsche and up to the late Richard Rorty it is accepted as a principle of philosophy that reason can offer little guidance in matters of morality or, for that matter, little help in grasping the nature of reality itself.

But the problem is not simply that man cannot justify the morality that means so much to him without recourse to God. The problem is that man, however moral in some respects, and however deeply moral is in his own self-concept, is in fact immoral in his life. His morality, whatever it is, is finally a farce. Man's rebellion against God is illustrated not only by his effort to justify himself and his life apart from God. It is illustrated and expressed still more simply in man's moral corruption, his selfishness, his dishonesty, his impurity, his cruelty and his failure to live up to his own moral code. He knows the good but he doesn't do it.

Paul will use his own timeless illustrations of the moral depravity of human beings, but I come back from our trip with a fresh set of illustrations of my own; the more vivid for being so recent. I think of the long, high wall that is rising in Israel to separate the Arabs from the Jews, a witness borne to so many years of murder and attempted murder, of deep and seemingly ineradicable hatred. Or at a much more mundane level, I visualize Greece with more graffiti destroying the look of the place than you can imagine. Young men – it is almost always young men who deface property in this way – who are hardly old enough to have thought a serious thought about what they are doing, find it natural to spoil and mar and defile the property and so the lives of others. The graffiti in Greece is so ubiquitous, even painted over grand old buildings of great beauty, that it appears that people have been utterly demoralized by it and are making no effort any longer to clean it up. The so-called mother of civilization has become a grubby, dirty place in

some large part because countless numbers of young men find a thrill in uglying up someone else's property. Or take the petulant, misbehaving, often screaming child in the line boarding our plane in Paris. All this is the stuff of ordinary human life.

Or, take our last day in Athens. We were in the midst of finishing up some gift buying. We had our money for the remaining errands – including the taxi ride to the airport very early the next morning – we had a list of things to do when suddenly I realized that my wallet was missing. I'm pretty sure I know the exact moment when it was picked from my back pocket; I just didn't realize what was happening at the time. And so, first in desperation, then in confusion, and finally in dreary acceptance we spent the last hours of our trip finding out what we could do – we lost both the money we had and the means of getting more –, calling the consulate, having money wired from the States, cancelling our cards, and all the rest. The loss of the money, the driver's license, and the bank cards was less painful than the injustice of it all, the cruelty of it. The thief or thieves certainly had no conscience about any of that. They took what they could with no regard for the misery they caused. And, of course, it wouldn't have mattered to them if this had been the *first* day of our trip instead of the last.

But then, as I thought about it, as I was forced to think about it by my own conscience, I could not help but wonder at my powerful sense of grievance, my sense of an injustice having been committed *against me*, my outrage at that injustice, when, as I know only too well, I am committing injustices against others and against God all the time and hardly ever really feel the same outrage against injustice when it is committed by myself. Have your pocket picked in a foreign country and your own heart becomes a window on the life of mankind.

In the opening chapters of Romans Paul is unflinching in exposing the moral failure of mankind and, especially, the hypocrisy that has become mankind's characteristic moral feature. Hypocrisy is what one gets, inevitably gets, when moral commitment and the sense of God is combined in the same life with comprehensive moral failure, when rebellion against God is practiced by those who have been made in the image of a just and holy God, when inescapably moral beings must come to terms with their own immorality. Human beings have become past masters of saying one thing and doing another, of passing moral judgment on people for failing to do what they themselves fail to do or for doing what they themselves do. They cannot escape a penchant for moral judgment – it is built within them – but they cannot be good either, because God is good and to be truly good one must be like God and submit to God's will and rebels, in the nature of the case, will not do this. And so man is left with only this: the life of a hypocrite, a poseur, a pretender. And such, Paul demonstrates, we are all by nature.

That is the truth, the bottom truth about mankind and no one has ever described it and explained and asserted it as clearly and uncompromisingly and relentlessly as has the Apostle Paul in his Letter to the Romans. It is Paul's stripping bare the moral pretense of men and women that accounts, in largest part I think, for the offense that Romans has caused to so many through the ages. The truth often hurts! The truth is often unwelcome!

The truth, therefore, is that human beings are inveterate sinners against both God and man. That is the reality that explains so much of our world and the experience of human beings in our world. It is what makes for the darkness of human life.

But it is hardly the last word Paul has to say about religion and the reality of human life. For Romans is much more about the solution to man's problem than it is about the problem itself. It is about what God himself did to address man's moral and spiritual condition. It is about the incarnation, obedience, suffering and death of the Son of God and the way in which the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ restore men and women, boys and girls to peace with God, to the experience of the love of God, and to true goodness of life. In Romans, more than anywhere else in the Bible, we have a thoroughgoing explanation of just how Christ's achievement in history is made a living power in a particular human being's personal experience. By trusting in Christ and his work the sinner is made righteous before God and begins to live righteously among men. It is this great *change* that the Bible understands to be *salvation*. Alienation from God becomes peace with God. Bondage to sin becomes freedom from sin. The judgment of God becomes acceptance by God. Rebellion against God becomes living with and for God. A redemption in history effects, by the work of the Holy Spirit, in the existential experience of individual human beings first forgiveness of sins and then the transformation of life.

Sin, good news, atonement, faith, righteousness, freedom, hope, and glory: this is the vocabulary of Romans. But Paul is hardly finished when he has set out the divine plan to deliver human beings from sin and death. There are great issues here and great issues invariably churn up all manner of confusion and any number of questions. Paul wants his readers to understand, to gain a deep understanding of these fundamental realities and the meaning of human life. So he patiently anticipates questions and objections and deals with them one by one. And then, lest anyone fail to understand the implications of this divine gift of new life given by God he sets out in outline form the nature of the new life that the followers of Jesus Christ must now live. *Love, obedience, humility, and self-denial* in gratitude to God and Christ, this is the vocabulary of Romans as well.

Romans, though a more complete account of the Christian message than provided in any other of his letters, or, for that matter, in any other book of the Bible, trades in what are, after all, the commonplaces of biblical teaching: man's bondage to sin, God's grace to undeserving sinners, the atonement of Christ, the summons to faith in Jesus, and the life of gratitude and goodness that must follow. Indeed, we have much the same message in Paul's Letter to the Galatians, which one scholar has described as "the rough model to the finished statue" of Romans. [Lightfoot, *Galatians*, 49]

For serious Christians there is nothing quite like Paul's Letter to the Romans. It is the foundation of their faith and life. Perhaps this is especially true for Protestant Christians. However much they may love Peter and John, we are all, perhaps to a degree we don't fully comprehend, Pauline in our understanding of reality and that, more than anything else, because of the influence of Romans on our conceptions of God and man and salvation and the Christian life. It is Romans that puts it all together for us; that systematizes our understanding of our faith. It is Romans that has done this for the preachers who have taught us our faith.

It is no wonder that the great early Christian preacher, John Chrysostom, had the Letter to the Romans read to him twice a week. And only eternity will reveal how many people through the

ages came to be Christians in the first place because of the argument, the logic, the passionate reasoning of Paul in this mighty letter. It was a verse in Romans that made Augustine a Christian; a passage from Romans that made William Cowper a believer in Jesus Christ. Perhaps more than anything else it was Luther's study of this letter that transformed his thinking about Christ and salvation and led eventually to the Protestant Reformation. Listen to the great Reformer's encomium to Romans.

“This epistle is the very heart and center of the New Testament and the purest and clearest Gospel. It well deserves to be memorized word for word by every Christian man; and not only that: a man ought to live with it day by day, for it is the daily bread of souls. One cannot read it too often or too thoroughly or consider it too often or too well; and the more one deals with it, the dearer it becomes and the sweeter it grows upon the tongue... We find in the epistle all that a Christian ought to know, and that in great abundance, namely, what the Law is, what the Gospel is, what sin and punishment are, what grace, faith, righteousness, Christ, God, good works, love, hope, and the cross are, and what our attitude toward all men ought to be, toward saints and sinners, the strong and the weak, friend and foe, and toward ourselves. And all this excellently supported [by Scripture and argument] so that there is nothing left to be desired here. ... Therefore every Christian should be familiar with this epistle and practice its teachings constantly.” [Cited in Reymond, *Paul: Missionary Theologian*, 212]

In other words, if you want to know who God is, who you are and what you are, what God has done and is doing in the world to rescue men and women and bring them to everlasting life; if you want to know how to live and, perhaps even more important, *why* to live, Romans is your book. It is unquestionably the most important and most influential theological and religious treatise ever written.

Paul had never met the Romans to whom he wrote his great Letter. We may wonder what they thought of it when it was first read to them in their assemblies. We wonder if they found parts of it as difficult to understand as many have since. But we can gather how they appreciated the Letter and what they thought of its writer by the reception they afforded Paul when he finally visited Rome a few years later. When they heard that Paul was coming they traveled to meet him, walking all the way, the first group finally meeting up with Paul and his company at the Forum of Appius (as we read in Acts 28), some 43 miles from Rome. Have you ever walked 43 miles? It is a long way to walk! They must have loved that Letter!