

Reflections on Romans

Romans 1-16

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This is the last message in the longest sermon series we've done. To think when we started, Corona was a beer, iPhone 8 was the latest and greatest, and Harry and Meghan Markle were adored by the British public. A lot has changed in three years. Little did we know the upheaval in our world that would take place. Knowing what we know now, would we have picked a different portion of Scripture to spend three and a half years in? Actually, we couldn't have picked a better one to provide the spiritual ballast we would need.

Today, we put a bow on this series and this wonderful letter. This is my favorite book of the Bible and my favorite teaching series I've ever done. Also, the hardest. Followed by Hebrews and 1 Corinthians. Hard isn't bad. Hard is just hard and challenging, but in a good way. I hope it's been a blessing to you. Our pastors and teachers offer these series as love gifts. They are labors of love. I end this one with some sadness. I don't know if I'll get to do Romans again before you all put me out to pasture. I remember when we came from our honeymoon. I knew there were good days ahead, but I suspected the days I had just experienced may go down as my happiest. That's how I feel about Romans. Good years ahead but Romans will likely always be remembered as a favorite.

So how to wrap it up? We are going to do a review walk through and then highlight some key takeaways for the future.

Romans...One Last Time

Romans begins with, *"Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus...concerning his Son.... through whom we have received grace...for the sake of his name among all the nations..."* (Romans 1:1ff ESV). It ends with, *"to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen"* (Romans 16:27 ESV).

What lies between these words is the most majestic and breathtaking description of the gospel ever written. One last time, Paul doesn't begin his gospel with the love of God or the grace of God, he begins it with the wrath of God against all mankind. We refuse to worship our Creator; rather we worship stuff he created, and ultimately ourselves. Even within what he created is evidence of God, his power and divine nature, such that on Judgment Day, no one can say, *I didn't know*. We are without excuse. This leaves human beings who were made to worship infinite glory to try and grind out meaning living for much lesser realities like money, fame, sex, family, etc. Good things but good things with God. This leaves us despairing and sensing something is very wrong in our world.

Chapter 2—God is right to judge us as unrighteous. In judgment God gives us what we want and what we deserve. He gives us eternity without his blessed presence and eternity with his "wrath and fury." It's true for both Jews and Gentiles, even though Jews have tremendous spiritual blessings. Still, even the law Jews revere condemns them. **Chapter 3**, the bottom line is that we all far short of God's glory. We all are unrighteous before him. Then in Chapter 3, Paul pivots from the bad news to the good news.

"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus

Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:21–24).

What? We deserve wrath but there’s a way to stand righteous before God? Yes, Jesus, the Son of God, dies in our place as an atoning sacrifice for God’s wrath. He alone provides righteous standing by faith in him. Here is a major theme in Romans—justification. God declares us righteous. Are we righteous actually, in practice? No. Yet, Jesus’ death satisfied God’s wrath allowing a just God to declare sinners justified and who promises to treat us as perfectly holy forever. Such is the grace of God.

Chapter 4—Even Abraham had to be justified by faith. If Abraham had to be justified by faith to be saved, then who are you and I to think we can merit saving favor with God?

Chapter 5—Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God forever. Justification is God’s promise to treat us as fully righteous as Jesus forever and ever. Such a gift. Such grace.

Chapter 6—*So that means we can live any way we want now and go to heaven, right?* Wrong. The grace of God is freedom not to sin. We used to be in bondage to sin. It’s all we could do. The grace of God enables us to say no to sin. Since sin steals my joy and hollows me out, why would I want to do that anymore? By God’s grace, I have a new nature. A nature empowerment by the Spirit of God to live righteously. To live for God and enjoy all things for his sake and glory.

Chapter 7—Yet I still live in the tension of having my old sinful nature still powerfully active in my life. It seeks to destroy God’s good work in me. Such that even when I go to do good, there is this inclination in me to turn that good into an evil. To do good sinfully. *“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:24-25).*

Chapter 8—The greatest chapter in the greatest book of the Bible. It begins with *“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).* Not only do we not get his wrath, but we are also guaranteed his love forever. A sticky love that guarantees glorification and *“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38–39).*

Romans 9-11 clarify that the people of God are God’s elect ones, including Jews and Gentiles. Like branches grafted into the tree, we Gentiles are nourished by the spiritual tree of Israel. But there is only one people of God. This is God’s sovereign love and grace. What is our response? *“For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever” (Romans 11:36).*

Chapter 12—*Therefore, in view of all these amazing mercies of God, we must present all that we are as worship to God (Romans 12:1),* serving each other in the church, loving our enemies, submitting to governing authorities over us as an act of worship to God (**Romans 13**) and loving across big and small differences. God’s big love to us calls us to love each other.

Romans 14—This includes matters non-essential to the gospel. Lifestyle choices, even ones based on past religious and conscience practice. The Jewish believers were still influenced

by the Old Testament practices of what to eat or drink or what day to worship. The Gentile Christians in the church had no legacy or conscience around these things. How do we apply the gospel to little differences? Keep them little. Don't judge. Put the other person's preferences ahead of your own, even that means restricting your freedom. Do it for love and for God.

Chapter 15—Welcome each other as God welcomed us into his heart even though we are much different from him. Serve each other as Jesus served us. And finally, in **chapter 16**, Paul explains his desire to come to Rome and Spain. He greets key members of the church of Rome. He sends greetings from key members of the Corinthian church. Doxology: "*To the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen*" (Romans 16:27). That's a romp through Romans. Most of that should sound familiar.

Providential Timing of Romans series

As I look back on the series, there was amazing correlation between what we were learning and the world in which we were living. Here is 2020:

Date	Circumstance	Romans Theme
March 2020	COVID-19	<i>Romans 14</i> Love one another/Put others ahead of yourself
Summer 2020	Racial Turmoil	<i>Romans 15</i> God loves ethnicities/Jesus died for all/Unity
Fall 2020	Presidential election	<i>Romans 13</i> Christian citizenship, role of government, submission to authorities over us

Back in 2018, could we have predicted any of these or the chaos they would create in our society? No. Yet, in the providence of God, what was going on in the world was what was going on in Romans. The Bible is always relevant. All these centuries after being written, what it says is still what we need. The alignment this past year was uncanny. Thank you, God. It helped get us through 2020 together.

Four Takeaways from the Romans Series

Among so many choices, these stand out to me.

The gospel is God's answer to man's wreckage

Romans 1 is terrible. It's terrible to be told you are under the wrath of God. The explanation, while brief, explains exactly the world we live in. Carnage. Wreckage. Death. God made a beautiful cosmos and made us the pinnacle. We took and smashed it. The result? Death and a million depressing consequences we see all around us. Some we get used to, like locks on our doors. Others we fear, like the fraudulent nature of our lives and our impending death. Some we don't think about nearly as much as we should like the reality of wrath forever. This week, my daughter Madeline asked me, *Daddy, what is hell like?* I told her a few things and one was, *it goes on forever and ever. You cannot escape hell.* That's Romans 1.

What is striking is how Paul's explanation of why the world is the way it is, is utterly different from contemporary explanations. We are told, man is born good. The ills of society are the fault of religion, lack of education, lack of money. The solutions include government control, globalization, faster internet.

The world diagnoses the problem very differently and tries to solve the problem very differently. Paul's diagnosis is that sin and punishment explain the world. The cure is nothing other than the gospel of God through faith in Jesus Christ producing new life in us. The result is a new society of Christians who are amazed at the grace of God, love one another despite different opinions on secondary matters, despite long standing racial and ethnic loathing. In Romans 1, we are sinners ready to fight each other. By Romans 16 we are greeting one another with a holy kiss.

How? The gospel. The deepest explanation of God's grace and gospel ever. We summarize it with, we are great sinners and Christ is a great Savior.

Government can't do it. Schools can't do it. Money can't do it. The gospel does it. The world needs a Savior and his name is Jesus.

A small gospel makes petty Christians

It's easy to see other people's weaknesses. We've spent three years seeing the Roman church for how petty many of them were. They let little things become big and divisive things. It's easy to do. We do it all the time. Romans gives perspective by placing the massiveness of God's grace and love next to the petty secondary matter. It shows how small ethnic differences and liberty differences really are.

It's like a trick fisherman use. Growing up we fished all the time. At the end of the day, we often took pictures. Fishermen always want to make the fish appear bigger than they are. What do you do? You always hold the fish closer to the camera. The closer the better. Do that and a perch looks like a great white shark. What happens when you put the perch next to an actual great white shark? It puts the perch in perspective.

Paul sent a great white shark to Rome. The gospel in Romans puts the perch and minnow issues in perspective. Or it should. When we lose sight of the glory and the grandeur of the glory of God in the gospel, a gospel of God's infinite grace toward me, God's people will degenerate into squabbles about the pettiest things. The minor thing becomes a major thing instead of keeping the main thing the main thing.

It's been a year of small things appearing to be big things. The Christians who keep a proper perspective are those who have a giant gospel. Romans has helped us. Let's not sweat the little things or get cranky about the little things. Let's care about the big things and there is nothing bigger than the gospel.

Romans pictures the church we aspire to be: Deeply rooted, always relevant

There are lots of church models out there. The attractional church. The political church. The social action church. The focus of their ministries and teaching flow in those categories. To be clear about our church, we aspire to be the *deeply rooted, always relevant church*. We start with doctrine, like Romans starts with doctrine. Eleven chapters of doctrine. Doctrine first. Deeply rooted there. But also like Romans, relevant. Chapters 12-16 filled with practical Christian living. Please note the order. I remember years ago a guy saying to me, "How about in your sermons skipping the exposition and getting right to the application? That's the good stuff." That's like starting a skyscraper with floor 81. You might like the views there, but it takes 80 floors of support to get you there.

For 20 plus years, we've been trying to earn the reputation in Northwest Indiana, *if you want to hear the Bible, go to Bethel*. Our community is filled with teaching and teachers, preaching and preachers. But who do we aspire to be? The deeply rooted, always relevant Bible-preaching church. Three and a half years in Romans says something. I like it.

Let's never lose the wonder of the gospel

One of my favorite messages in Romans was from 11:33, "*Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*"

I used Dr. Seuss' book, *Horton Hears a Who*. Many of you know the story. There's an elephant and there's a speck, and on the speck there's a group of people called the Whos. Now the Whos are unaware that there's a bigger world out there. They think they're "it" there in Whoville. And Horton is the big elephant with the big ears and he hears the Whos and he alone can hear them, and the other animals can't hear them. So they want to knock out Horton because they think he's crazy. But he urges the Whos to make as much noise as they possibly can so that all the other animals can know that there are actually little bitty people on the speck. And I won't ruin the rest of the story for you, but that's basically the plot line.

To me, it's such a wonderful picture of what it means to be a human being. We live our day-to-day life here in Northwest Indiana, and some of us might think we're big stuff. *I am so important. Look at me. I'm achieving this*. We fail to realize that we're the little Whos in Whoville. The Whos couldn't imagine something as massive as an elephant. It was just beyond their ability to comprehend.

But isn't that what Paul says about God? "*How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*" (Romans 11:33) Even Romans just scratches the surface of the infinite God. We don't get to the end of Romans and go, *I've got it figured out. I've got God figured out*. No. We haven't even started to understand how God did it.

Romans is the most God-saturated book of the Bible. I read somewhere that "God" occurs 146 times in Romans or once every 46 words. Romans is about justification and adoption and union with Christ and ethnic harmony and many things. But in the big picture, it's a book about God. Let's never lose the wonder of this God and how, beyond our comprehension, he made sinners righteous forever.

A final illustration of Romans. I want to tell you about an unexpected thing that happened to me this past year. My senior year of high school basketball, I wore the shoes everybody wanted to wear—First edition Air Jordans. I think I jumped higher in them. After High School, I put them in a box of memorabilia and all these years I have kept them. Last year, after the documentary *The Last Dance* came out, one of our staff told me they thought my shoes could be valuable. I had a hard time believing it because they are in terrible shape.



Look at the heel. But original shoes and original laces. I thought, why keep these anymore? I got my girls together and I said, *Daddy is going to put these up for sale and whatever comes in we will give to a ministry. OK? OK.*

So I put them for sale on Facebook Marketplace. I put pictures of the broken heel up as well. I put a high ask price on them: \$200. I thought, we'll see. Within minutes my Facebook feed was blowing up. Offers from around the country. I started reading the notes. Grown men were pleading with me to sell these shoes to them. Please me. Oh, please sell to me! More and more. I finally decided to sell them to a teenager who wanted to buy them for his dad who wore the same shoe his senior year. He was thrilled.

What's the point? I should have asked for a lot more. True. Is this not the big story of Romans? Romans 1. We were made special. Pristine. Like a fresh pair of Air Jordans. But sin ruined us. Broke us. We should have been thrown away. But God kept us. Saved us. And in the end, declares our value—not based on our brokenness, because we are still sinfully broken. But we are a treasure because of whose name we bear. Air Jesus. All our wear and tear remind us of our sin but his name on us reminds of our salvation and the wonder that God would forever love people like us.

In the end, what can we say? *"For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever"* (Romans 11:36).

And that is the book of Romans.

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