

## **“INTRODUCTION TO PAUL’S LETTER TO THE ROMANS.”**

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**First Christian Reformed Church**

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### **Scripture Texts: II Peter 3:13-18**

**Prayer:** Holy Father, may this seed of your Word fall on good soil and take deep root and bear good fruit, thirty, sixty and a hundred fold for your glory. In Jesus name, Amen.

### **Introduction to the introduction.**

Think of the books of the Bible as a mountain range of 66 peaks. We have climbed several mountain peaks together over the past 15 years, some of them taller than others.

We started 15 years ago with Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. I still look back on that climb with fond memories, our first adventure together in the Word of God. We spent a few years in the Gospel of Mark, the shortest of the four Gospel peaks. Those were some good hikes.

I remember being afraid of Revelation, but we tackled it and managed to get to the summit without too many falls or loss of life. We followed that with Daniel. We also did a series of smaller peaks, James, I and II Peter, I, II, III John, Jonah, Ruth and Esther.

Ecclesiastes wasn’t as tall as Revelation, but it presented a tricky, challenging climb. But again, I am thankful we did it, and the summit was particularly satisfying. Acts wasn’t as hard a climb, but it was a long one, so daunting in its own way.

With every climb, I have been aware of a peak looming in the distance, overshadowing every other peak. The Mount Everest of the books of the Bible, The Book of Romans.

I have avoided it for my thirty-nine years of ministry. I have held it off with a certain trepidation and great respect. I have doubted myself; I am not that good a climber, I said. It is best left to the great veterans, John Calvin, Charles Hodge, Martin Lloyd-Jones, John Piper.

But I have prayed over the years that God would prepare me and show me when it was time. In the meantime, I prepared, I gathered and collected climbing gear, climbing aids, over fifty books, numerous sermons, articles, internet links, too much actually. There is no way I can carry it all up the mountain with me.

The Book of Romans is a vast mountain filled with pure gold, and over the centuries there have been countless gold rushes. Innumerable saints have come away from the Book of Romans far richer for it. The book of Romans has changed more lives for eternity than any other book.

This morning I want to share with you some of those gold rush stories as a way of encouraging you to join me on this journey with a great expectation that we too will find gold. With these stories I hope to prompt you to actively participate in this climb and this dig. I guarantee you the view from on top is breathtaking and you will be richer for it.

## **John Chrysostom**

John Chrysostom, archbishop of Constantinople, around 400 AD said, “Romans is unquestionably the fullest, deepest compendium of all sacred foundation truths.” Chrysostom had it read to him twice a week.

## **Aurelius Augustine**

We know Augustine as one of the greatest early church fathers. What you might not know is before he became a great church father, he was a wicked sinner, meaning he was shamelessly immoral, given over to sexual immorality, lust, greed, selfish ambition. A real prodigal son.

In the summer of 386 in Milan, Italy, barely thirty years old he was sitting in a garden of a friend weeping, on the verge of despair because of his sin and lack of resolve to repent. Then he heard some children playing a game near by calling out to each other, “take and read, take and read.”

He took it as a divine command, and opened a Bible randomly to the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans, the section where Paul writes of the “transformation of believers.” His eyes fell on:

**Romans 13:12-14** The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. 13 Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. 14 But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

All the darkness in his soul vanished away, light flooded his heart. God used the two-edged sword of those words to pierce his soul and transform his life. He went on to become one of the most important theologians the world has ever seen.

## **Martin Luther**

The year was 1513. The place was Wittenberg, Germany. The man was Martin Luther. He was agonizing over trying to earn his way into heaven. Luther was desperately searching for some relief his troubled conscience.

The righteousness of God was Luther’s great stumbling block. He read it as the standard we were required to meet to avoid God’s wrath and earn His favor. But it was an impossible standard.

Finally came the breakthrough. Hanging over the pit of hell, one evening preparing a lecture, he came across a text that not only changed his life, but changed the course of history. He read for the first time with fresh understanding, Romans 1:17. There it was, the righteous shall live by faith. This righteousness was not demanded by God from us, but a gift from God to us. Listen to his own words:

“I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby, through grace and sheer mercy, he justifies us by faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before ‘the righteousness of God’ had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gateway into heaven.”

The doors of paradise swung open when he saw justification was by faith alone. From this came the great solas of the Reformation, grace alone, by faith alone, in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone, all from Scripture alone.

The Reformation could be attributed to one monk wrestling with one verse, 1:17. This book's effect on Luther ushered in the great Protestant Reformation, the greatest awakening our world has seen since the days of the apostles. Romans became the book of the Reformation. During the Reformation over 70 commentaries were written on just the book of Romans.

Martin Luther wrote in his Preface to the Epistle to the Romans, “This Epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament and the very purest Gospel, and is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul. It can never be read or pondered too much.”

### **Philip Melanchthon.**

Philip Melanchthon, a reformer with Martin Luther in Wittenberg, Germany, as if taking Luther's words to heart, copied Romans twice in his own hand, to make it his very own.

### **John Calvin.**

John Calvin wrote commentaries on 48 books of the Bible stretching 46 volumes. His first commentary was the book of Romans. His great *Institutes of Christian Religion* references Romans more than any other NT book.

In Calvin's preface to his commentary on Romans he said, “When anyone gains a knowledge of this Epistle, he has an entrance opened to him to all the most hidden treasures of Scripture.”

### **John Bunyan**

In 1661 English pastor John Bunyan was imprisoned for 12 years for preaching the Gospel. While in prison he studied the book of Romans and was so inspired by Paul's letter he wrote

*Pilgrim's Progress* which became one of the most published and translated books in history and has led to the conversion of untold thousands.

## **John Wesley**

The year was 1738, May 24. The place was Aldersgate Street in London, England. A failed minister and missionary by the name of John Wesley reluctantly went to a small Bible study where someone read aloud from Martin Luther's Commentary on Romans.

Wesley later wrote, "About a quarter to nine while Luther was describing the change which 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 my salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken my sins away, even mine; and saved me from the law of sin and death."

From Wesley's spiritual new birth came the greatest evangelical awakening and revival of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in both England and America, known as the Great Awakening. Some historians say every single revival in history can be linked in some way to this powerful letter of Romans.

## **[Sarah Edwards**

Across the pond in America on January 20, 1742, Sarah Edwards, the wife of America's greatest pastor and theologian, Jonathan Edwards, was quietly reading and praying and came to Romans 8:34 where God spoke to her in a profound life-changing way:

"'Who shall lay any charge against us', ... strongly impressed on me how impossible it was for anything in heaven or earth, in this world or the future, ever to separate me from the love of God which was in Christ Jesus. I cannot find language to express how certain this appeared ... Melted and overcome by the sweetness of this assurance, I fell into a great flow of tears and could not forbear weeping aloud. It appeared certain to me that God was my Father, and Christ my Lord and Savior, that He was mine and I His."

## **William Cowper**

December 1763, at St. Albans Insane Asylum in London 32 year old William Cowper, was there for suicidal depression which he battled for years. One day he opened a Bible at random, and the first verse he saw was Roman 3:25:

**Romans 3:25** God put [Jesus] forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

"Immediately I received the strength to believe it, and the full beams of the Sun of Righteousness shone upon me. I saw the sufficiency of the atonement He had made, my pardon sealed in His blood, and all the fullness and completeness of His justification. In a moment I

believed, and received the gospel...my eyes filled with tears ... overwhelmed with love and wonder.”

After his release from the asylum, he joined the church pastored by John Newton. With Newton’s encouragement, Cowper wrote 68 hymns, including, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way,” “O For a Closer Walk with God,” and “There is a Fountain Filled with Blood.”

The Holy Spirit led him to Romans, and rescued Cowper from the darkness of death. He continued to battle depression, but the decisive battle for his soul was won.

## **Abraham Kuyper**

In the mid-1800’s Romans can be linked to another revival that extended to Holland and greatly influenced Abraham Kuyper, Prime Minister of the Netherlands, and a great theologian who is famous for saying, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine! ”

And I could go on and on.

The great English poet Samuel Coleridge said, “Paul’s Epistle to the Romans is the greatest piece of literature ever written, the most profound work in existence.”

John Knox said, “It is unquestionably the most important theological work that has ever been written.”

“One of the greatest documents ever written by a human being” (N.T. Wright).

“Arguably the most influential book in Christian history” (Doug Wilson).

William Tyndale believed that every Christian should learn Romans by heart.

It’s been called “The cathedral of the Christian faith,” “The Constitution of Christianity,” the Magna Carta of the human soul. This is Paul’s magnum opus, his most theologically rich and deep letter, the Gospel According to Paul.

This book was eternally foreordained by God to be the salvation of souls, the forgiveness of sinners, the hope of the despairing and depressed, the opening of blind eyes, the fuel for the fires of revival, and the transformation of the world.

## **II Peter 3:15-16**

Perhaps the greatest endorsement comes, not surprisingly from the NT itself, from Peter’s second letter. I close by drawing your attention to what Peter says about Paul and his writings.

**II Peter 3:13-18** According to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

14 Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. 15 And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our *beloved brother Paul* also wrote to you according to the *wisdom given him*, 16 as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are *hard to understand*, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, *as they do the other Scriptures*. 17 You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. 18 But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

*Our beloved brother.* That Peter calls Paul his dear beloved brother is huge when we remember in Galatians 2 Paul writes that he saw Peter acting hypocritically toward the Gentiles and his sinful behavior was causing others to sin as well. Paul opposed Peter to his face (Gal. 2:11-14).

**Proverbs 27:5-6** Better is open rebuke than hidden love. 6 Faithful are the wounds of a friend.

A wise person is teachable and humble enough to receive instruction and correction. We have before us the wisdom of God given to us through our beloved brother, Paul. May we receive Paul's instruction and correction as graciously and profitably as Peter.

*Some parts of Paul's wisdom are hard to understand.* Of course, some parts are hard to understand. It is the divinely inspired revelation of an infinitely wise God. This is the mind of God and God's thoughts are far above our thoughts. If there weren't parts hard to understand we would question what kind of God wrote it.

Notice what Peter doesn't say. He doesn't dismiss the hard parts, he doesn't say skip over them, he doesn't take issue with them or disagree with them, or twist them. Hard passages expose our ignorance and finiteness. Come with humility and a teachable spirit, diligent to grow in grace.

*Paul wrote Scripture according to the wisdom given to him by God.* Peter believed what Paul wrote was Scripture from God and so did Paul.

**I Corinthians 1:13** We impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

In other words, Paul's letters are inspired revelation, they are the Word of God. There are tremendous riches in this letter for each of us.

No book of the Bible opens up the power and mystery of the Gospel more clearly than Romans. Which explains why it never ceases to have a profound impact on those who study it seriously. Will you open yourself up to what the Holy Spirit wants to teach you?

## **Conclusion.**

It is truly a daunting task to stand before these 16 chapters that have so powerfully been used by God in the history of the church and ask Him to give us the same grace to be made rich by His Word and be changed by it.

I am excited and fearful at the same time. I believe God has brought me and us to this place and time, but as I stand here at the trail head and look at this mountain I am humbled by the task.

Pray for me that God will give me the grace and wisdom to preach this book. Pray that God will guard and keep me and us from the attack of the enemy who will try to keep us from this work.

As we embark on this journey may God be pleased for the sake of His glory and His Son and His Gospel to make us more spiritually rich with His love and truth.

This is the book the Church of the 21st century needs to discover all over again. We all need reformation, renewal, revival. May it begin here in our study of Romans.

Therefore, in the words of Peter, while we are waiting for the new heaven and the new earth, let us be diligent to grow in grace and the knowledge of God in Scripture. Take advantage of God's patience and His delay in coming, it is for the sake of your salvation and your souls.

Soli deo gloria. To God alone be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

**Prayer:** Holy Father, as we humble ourselves before your holy Word and especially this most wise letter given to us by your Holy Spirit through the pen of your chosen apostle Paul, would you be pleased to send your Holy Spirit to be our teacher, our guide, our help, and open our eyes and hearts to see your wisdom and truth, and grow in our knowledge of your will that we might walk in a manner worthy of our Lord. Fall afresh on this church and each one of us for your glory and our edification. In the name of Jesus Christ, your Son and our Savior and Lord, Amen.