“The Greatest Letter Ever Penned”

10/15/2017

Romans 1:1-11

Please find with me the first chapter of the Book of Romans. All of the Books of the Bible, as you know, are important. But, if you were asked to choose one out the sixty-six as the greatest, which one would you choose? For me, I’m in agreement with the writer who said that “Romans was the greatest letter ever written” (French L. Arrington).

Today I’d like you to begin a study with me on the Book of Romans. And here’s how I’d like to begin it. I want to begin by showing you how just how large this book is. And by large, I mean its importance. And here’s how I’d like to do it. I want to show you the effect it has had on a few people.

Some of you have read or heard Pastor John Piper. He was the Pastor of Bethel Baptist Church Minneapolis MN for no less than 33 years. Here’s what Piper says about the Book of Romans. *“I don't remember being converted at age six at my mother's side in Fort Lauderdale, Florida (as my father reminds me). I only remember believing. But I do remember learning the meaning of my conversion - and I learned it from the book of Romans: "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (3:23);*

*and "the wages of sin is death" (6:23); and "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (5:8); and "if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (10:9). … My conversion, my call to the ministry of the Word, and the decisive shaping of my vision of God was sealed by the book of Romans.”*

St. Augustine is usually referred to as one of the Early Church Fathers, born in 354. He lived for seventy-four years until 430 A.D. In his “Confessions,” St. Augustine said this. *“I heard the voice as of a boy or girl, I*[*know*](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08673a.htm)*not which, coming from a neighbouring house, chanting, and oft repeating, Take up and read; take up and read. Immediately my countenance was changed, and I began most earnestly to consider whether it was usual for children in any kind of game to sing such words; nor could I remember ever to have heard*

*the like. So, restraining the torrent of my tears, I rose up, interpreting it no other way than as a command to me from*[*Heaven*](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07170a.htm)*to open the book, and to read the first chapter I should light upon. … So quickly I returned to the place where Alypius was sitting; for there had I*

*put down the volume of the*[*apostles*](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01626c.htm)*,*

*when I rose thence. I grasped, opened, and in silence read that paragraph on which my eyes first fell — Not in rioting and*[*drunkenness*](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01274a.htm)*, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying; but put on the*[*Lord Jesus Christ*](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08374c.htm)*, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the*[*lusts*](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09438a.htm)*thereof (*[*Romans 13:13-14*](http://www.newadvent.org/bible/rom013.htm#verse13)*).*

*No further would I read, nor did I need; for instantly, as the sentence ended—by a light, as it were, of security infused into my heart—all the gloom of*[*doubt*](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05141a.htm)*vanished away.”* [St. Augustine “Confessions” [VIII](http://www.biblestudytools.com/history/early-church-fathers/nicene/vol-1-saint-augustin/confessions-of-augustin/book-viii.html), 463-67 found on [www.biblestudytools.com](http://www.biblestudytools.com) “Romans: The Greatest Letter Ever Written” by French L. Arrington].

So, as you clearly see, St. Augustine came into the Light through the reading of the Book of Romans while John Piper came to a clear understanding of his conversion by the Book of Romans.

And one day a man named Martin Luther, a Professor of the Bible in Wittenberg, Germany (Professor from 1512-1519) came in contact with Romans. Here’s what he said. *“I had . . . been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. But . . . a single word in Chapter 1 [verse 17], ‘In it the righteousness of God is revealed,’ stood in my way. For I hated that word ‘righteousness of God,’ which . . . I had been taught to understand . . . is the righteousness [with which God] punishes the unrighteous sinner.”*

*“Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at [*[*Romans 1:17*](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rom%201.17)*], most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted. At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous*

*shall live.” There I began to understand [that] the righteousness of God is . . . righteousness with which [the] merciful God justifies us by faith. . . . Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.”* [Found on [www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org) “How Does The Gospel Save Believers” by Pastor John Piper].

And one day a man named John Wesley, a missionary, a man who had already crossed the Atlantic Ocean to serve in the Colony of Georgia, upon his return to England, was listening to someone read a commentary written by Martin Luther on the Book of Romans. Here’s his testimony. He recorded this in his journal on Wednesday, May 24, 1738. “I *came to convert the Indians, but, oh, who will convert me?” “In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans.*

*About a quarter before nine, while he 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 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.”* [Found on [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com) “The Moravians And John Wesley.”

Now, you’ve heard the phrase “You seem to be carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders”? I’d like to say that I believe that the weight of the entire Bible rests upon the Book of Romans. Personally I see the Apostle Paul as the greatest legal mind the Church has ever seen. And one of the reasons I say that is because he, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit authored the Book of Romans. There’s one book of the Bible that describes God’s Salvation better than any other. That’s the Book of Romans. And there’s no greater book written that describes the Christian life better.

So, I’ve titled today’s message “The Greatest Letter Ever Penned.”

No doubt, you’ve heard the phrase “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” It comes from the lips of the man Nathanael, who, when his brother Philip told him about Jesus, he responded with “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

So, I’d like to follow that very idea with this. “Can anything good come out of Greece?” Now, why, the question, “Can Anything Good Come Out of Greece?” Here’s the reason. Acts 20:1 *“And after the uproar was ceased, Paul called unto him the disciples, and embraced them, and departed for to go into Macedonia. (2) And when he had gone over those parts, and had given them much exhortation, he came into Greece, (3) And there abode three months.”*

Most, if, not all Bible scholars, for many generations now, believe and teach that Paul wrote this letter to the Romans while he was on his Third Missionary journey and while he was in Greece, likely in Corinth. This third missionary journey is found right here in Acts 20, in which Paul spent one full year of his life going back to the Churches he had started throughout that part of the world.

And we find that Paul stayed at least three months in Corinth. So, I’m of the persuasion that Paul wrote his Letter to the Romans during these three months; somewhere around 57 or 58 A.D. So, can anything good come out of Greece? Yes, the greatest letter ever penned.

Now, what’s so good about Romans? Let’s begin with what you might call the essence of the book. Paul gave it to us in the fifteenth verse of this first chapter. Romans 1:15*“So, as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also. (16) For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. (17) For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, the just shall live by faith.”*

I’d like to ask you today this question “Why do you need

the Gospel of Christ”? Verse 16; *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. (17) For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, the just shall live by faith.”*

Now, at first, this might seem somewhat strange for Paul to begin his book with *“For I am not ashamed of…”*

But, consider this. Everybody loves good news. And, to Paul, there is no better news in the entire world. If your Uncle John’s lawyer sent you a letter this week telling you that you just inherited his entire estate consisting of lands and property and boats and such to the tune of $1.2 million dollars, you would not only love that good news. You would want to let everyone know about it.

That’s how Paul felt about the Good News of the Gospel. So, rather than be ashamed of it; he held the Gospel in extremely high honor. Shame, as you know, is something you feel. Paul even uses this exact same word to describe how Jesus feels towards you. Hebrews 2:11 *“For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause* ***he is not ashamed*** *to call them brethren …”*

And further, Jesus uses the exact same word here. Mark 8:38 *“Whosoever therefore shall* ***be ashamed*** *of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man* ***be ashamed****, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”* You see, if you’re ashamed of something or someone, you don’t want to be identified with them.

How you ever considered the shame of the Cross of Christ? Crucifixion, I’m sure, was a hugely humiliating event. Here’s what Jesus said. Isaiah 50:6 *“I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting.”*

So, the question that comes to your heart right now is this. *“Am I ashamed of the Gospel of Christ?”* Folks, there is no shame in name of Christ. There is no shame in His Gospel. Now, should you or I be ashamed of the One Who took the shame of our sins on the Cross when He died?

And, can you now see what the opposite of shame is? It’s glory. Paul was not ashamed; rather he gloried in the Gospel of Christ. Listen, the world is not ashamed of multitudes of their sins today. They even brag about them. The Bible says Zephaniah 3:5 *“… the unjust knoweth no shame.”*

But, the opposite is true of those who are saved. Romans 10:11 *“For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.”*

You will see, as you and read and study this great Book, that you will never again have reason to feel ashamed of Jesus, or His Gospel, or His people.

And Paul give three reasons why he’s not ashamed. One, because it’s the only power God has to save someone from Hell. Two, because whosoever believes it will be immediately saved. And three, because it’s the one place where God’s righteousness is clearly revealed.

So, this is the essence of the Book of Romans. It’s the greatest letter ever penned. It’s a Book about Someone and Something you should never be ashamed of. It’s a book about Salvation. **What, then, is salvation?**

One, to be saved means to be rescued.

I can remember two significant times in my life when I was rescued. Once, when I was about seven years old, I remember going to swim at the Boys Club along with a number of my friends. Here’s what happened. When we arrived at the pool, everyone, to a boy, jumped in. So, what do you think I did? I jumped in the water; in the deep end. And in a matter of seconds I realized I couldn’t swim. And the next thing I know, someone was carrying me over to the side of the pool. He set me up on it. And I was saved. I was rescued. I had been drowning and nearly drowned. But, someone did what I could not do for myself. He rescued me. That’s a picture of salvation.

The second time I was saved was on December 9, 1967 in a movie theater in Binghamton, NY. There I had heard the Gospel and there, that day, someone led me in the sinner’s prayer and I was saved; that time for eternity.

And, honestly, at the time I didn’t understand much of what had happened to me. I only knew that I was a sinner and that Christ had paid for my sins. And, by the way, that was enough. I believed it. And that day I was rescued.

The Greek word for save is an interesting one. It’s **σωζω**

It means “to save, to deliver from danger or destruction, and to keep safe and sound.” Τhis is the exact same word that is used of Jesus in Matthew 1:21 *“And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save (****σωζω****) his people from their sins.”*

And Matthew 14:30 *“But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save (****σωζω****) me.”*

So, what then, did God rescue you from when you put your trust in Christ? Here are just a few things.

1. Condemnation in Hell – God justly condemns you for your sin. But, in Christ, your condemnation is removed. Now, I realize that Hell is not a popular topic even in the Church today. But, folks, it’s never been a popular topic.

Yet, apart from an understanding that we are all

condemned to Hell because of our sins, there is no reason for the Good News to be Good News. Let me just say this about Hell. Hell is a harsh reality. You see, if there were no Hell, there would be no need for Christ to die. He came to rescue us from the condemnation of Hell.

Jesus made this plain and simple. John 5:24 “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.”

Here’s how one writer puts it. *“There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power. … In the long run the answer to all those who object to the doctrine of hell is itself a question: “What are you asking God to do?”  ... To leave them alone? Alas, I am afraid that is what He does. . . . In the end, there are only two kinds of people—those who say to God “thy will be done” and those to whom God says in the end “thy will be done.”* (C. S. Lewis).

I ask you the, “What have you been saved from?” “What have you been rescued from?”

First, you’ve been rescued from the Condemnation of

Hell.

1. Second, you’ve been rescued from your shame and guilt. The effect of my sins is that I feel guilty. I’ve done things for which I am guilty and I am ashamed for what I had done. In Psalm 38:4 David says to the LORD *“For mine iniquities are gone over mine head: as an heavy burden they are too heavy for me.”*

Yet, my guilt has been dealt with by Someone Else;

Someone Who is standing in for me. A non-guilty Person has freely and willingly accepted my guilt and right now stands in for my. And, at the moment you believed on Christ, *your* guilt was removed from you and placed upon Christ. Every time you say that you’ve been forgiven, you are really saying “My guilt is gone.”

Or you can compare it to your being convicted of murder. You’ve been tried in a court of law. You’ve now been sentenced to life in prison. And, now you are serving your time. And someone comes to your cell and says “You are innocent of all the charges. You’re free.” And he opens the prison doors and tells you to go home. You’ve been rescued.

Do you remember what happened to Barabbas, the convicted murderer? The crowds shouted for Barabbas to be set free and Jesus to be crucified. Mark 15:7 says this *“And there was one named Barabbas, which lay bound with them that had made insurrection with him, who had committed murder in the insurrection.”*

How do you think Barabbas reacted to the truth that, though he was guilty, he was now free to go home to his family and friends, while Jesus was then scourged and nailed to a Roman Cross?

First, you’ve been rescued from the condemnation of Hell. [Adapted from William Hendriksen’s “Romans” page 60].

Second, you’ve been rescued from your shame and guilt.

Now third. You’ve been rescued from the power of sin.

1. The power of sin – if there is one thing every single

one of us has a serious problem with, it’s sin. We sin by nature, by habit, by practice, and by desire. So, what are you saved from? What did Jesus’ death on the Cross do? He faced and conquered the power of sin over you.

If you have believed on Christ, you’ve been rescued. Please don’t forget that every time you use the name “Jesus,” you are saying this “I have been rescued from the power of my sins.” Matthew 1:21 *“And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save (****σωζω****) his people from their sins.”* That’s Who Jesus *is*. And that’s what He came to do.

First, The condemnation of Hell.

Second, Your guilt.

Third, you’ve been rescued from the power of sin.

Fourth, slavery to sin.

1. Slavery to sin – apart from Christ, you are bound by

sin. Before Christ, sin is your master and your lord. Sin dwells in you just as surely as there is DNA in each of the cells of your body. And, in salvation, Jesus has come to deliver you out of that slavery. You’ve been rescued.

Let me illustrate this for you by comparing the difference between a lifejacket and a lifeboat. It’s from one of my favorite writers, Pastor Watchman Nee. *“A life jacket is different from a lifeboat. When a person falls into the sea, he grasps the life jacket thrown to him. Thus he does not sink; yet he does not get out of the water either. He stays in a condition of neither living nor dying.*

*A lifeboat, though, is something quite different. The person who has fallen into the sea can be drawn out of the water and put into a lifeboat. Similarly speaking, the salvation of our Lord cannot be likened to that of a life jacket but to that of a lifeboat.”* [From “A Life That Wins” by Watchman Nee pp. 22]. You see, what is it that God has rescued you from? He’s rescued you from slavery to your sins.

I saw this once on the Kennebec River in Maine. The men in our Church went on a whitewater rafting trip a number of years ago. And, as we were moving downstream along with some ten other rubber rafts, we saw a teenager who’d, not only fallen out of his boat; but his boat had gone on downstream and he was left in the water.

Our instructor had clearly told us what to do if we were to end up in the water. *“Lay back and put your feet up so you can steer yourself.”* This teenager was not doing that. So, we poled over to him. And my son Dan reached over the side of our boat and dragged him in. Now, can you see the difference between a rescue boat and a lifejacket? Spiritually speaking, Jesus pulls you into Himself and rescues you from the slavery to sin.

First, The condemnation of Hell.

Second, Your guilt.

Third, you’ve been rescued from the power of sin.

Fourth, slavery to sin.

Fifth, and finally, you’ve been rescued from the punishment for your sins.

1. Punishment – every sin has a consequence. So, every

sin has a punishment. Just like there are laws written against all sorts of crimes, there is a Law-giver in Heaven Who says that your sins must be judged. Romans 6:23 *“**For the wages of sin is death; …”*

And what happens at the moment of your salvation? You are rescued from that punishment you deserve for your sins.

One of the great preachers of the twentieth century was Dr. James Montgomery Boice. He pastored Tenth Presby-terian Church in Philadelphia for 32 years. Here’s how he describes this. “He tells the story of a young Russian—the son of a close friend of Czar Nicholas — who was caught stealing from the czar. As treasurer of a border fortress of the Russian army, the young man was to manage the czar’s money and dispense wages to the troops. But he began gambling and trying to cover his losses by borrowing from the army treasury.

One day he heard that a government auditor was coming to examine the books. He sat down and added up what he had taken. It was a huge amount. He emptied out his own resources, subtracted it from what should have been in the account and noted the great discrepancy. Under the amount due, he wrote: *“A great debt; who can pay?”* He couldn’t, and he knew no one who could help him. So he drew his revolver and decided to kill himself at midnight.

But as he waited for the clock to strike, he fell asleep, and while he slept, Czar Nicholas paid a surprise inspection visit. He saw the books, the despairing note, and the revolver, and he realized that the young man had betrayed his trust. But rather than arrest the young man, he had mercy on him. He stooped and wrote something next to the man’s note and quietly left.

When the young man awoke, he again picked up the gun and was about to pull the trigger when he noticed something. Next to his note, *“A great debt; who can pay?”* was a single word: *Nicholas.* And the next morning, a bag of coins arrived from Nicholas that covered the exact amount owed.”

You see, the salvation God provides is His paying a debt you earned; but could never pay off. Jesus Christ came into this world so pay your sin debt.

And how have you responded to that love? Have you believed on Christ? If not, why not?

Romans 1:16 *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation* ***to everyone that believeth****; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. (17) For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, the just shall live by faith.”*

And, last, have you been rescued? Have you believed on Christ? Your sins are the only thing that separates you from God.

You’ve broken every one of God’s Ten Commandments and you are in dire need of a rescue. I am offering that rescue boat to you today. If you will repent of your sin and believe on Jesus Christ today, you will be rescued; and rescued for eternity.

You see, the reason Paul was not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ was because it’s the only power of God to save someone from Hell. Because whosoever believes it will be immediately saved. And because it’s the only place where God’s righteousness is revealed.

So, today is the day of salvation. You need to deal with yourself, your sins, and the Savior today. What do you need to do? You need to Repent and to Believe.

* To Repent = I change my mind about God, Christ, my sin, and God’s free gift of salvation.
* To Believe = I simply trust Jesus Christ alone as the One Who paid the entire penalty for my sins.

Here’s the Salvation Prayer*. “LORD, I admit that I am a sinner and deserve judgment for my sins. I believe Jesus died in my place on the Cross to remove that judgment. Please save me today. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.”*

Shall we pray?

Now let’s sing Hymn # 354 “I Cannot Tell”

Here’s a simple outline of the entire letter.

Outline of the Book of Romans. [Dr. Robert Mounce]

1. Introduction Romans 1:l-17
2. The unrighteousness of all humankind Ro. 1:18 - 3:20
3. The righteousness only God can provide 3:21 - 5:21
4. The righteousness in which we are to grow 6:1- 8:39
5. God's righteousness vindicated Romans 9:1 -11:36)
6. How righteousness manifests itself 12:1 - 15:13

Conclusion Romans 15: l4 - 16:27

More testimonies

Professor Karl Barth (1886-1968), Swiss Professor who had been raised in the liberal theological seminaries in Germany, wrote this about the Book of Romans. *“Let God Be God.”* He was learning what the Book of Romans was all about *“that God, the living God, had come to deliver perplexed, self-contradictory men like himself from their sins through the power of Jesus Christ.”* [Found on [www.jermiah.org](http://www.jermiah.org) “An Introduction To The Theology of Karl Barth”]. Karl Barth had a huge influence on a man named Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Outline of Romans

Here’s a quick look at this first chapter.

1. Paul’s greeting to the Romans 1:1-7
2. Paul’s prayer for the Romans 1:8-12
3. Paul’s commitment to come to Rome 1:13-15
4. And Paul’s focus; the Gospel of Christ 1:16-17