

A LIFE-CHANGING LETTER

Introduction to the Book of Romans

Good morning! Sleepy New Year! I mean, Happy New Year! Who among you are happy today? Who among you are sleepy? Who are happy and sleepy? I am happy because last night or early this morning, I wasn't alone. Many people were still awake until the wee hours of the morning. But I hope you won't sleep on me this morning.

Last year, our theme was "Time to Build". What did we build? Don't say "nothing" because we actually built or re-built this church after two years of the pandemic by God's grace and help. Many of you have come back to church and we're showing a semblance of what the church used to be before the pandemic. We still have some building to do though. But I thought, if you really want to build, especially as far as a physical building is concerned, you have to do something first. What is it? It's similar to "Time to Build". Can you guess?

"Time to..." The first letter is also "B". "Time to B..." The second letter is "U". "Time to Bu..." And the third letter sounds like an "I". "Time to Buy". You can't build if you don't buy. So, that's our theme for this year. "Time to Buy". How does that sound, Kuya Rey?

Ok, that's a joke. I'll reveal our real theme later. So, let's go to our message this morning.

If I were to ask you, What's the most important letter you have ever read? I wonder what you'd say. A job offer? A loan approval? An audit by the IRS? A love letter? Does anyone still write love letters? Maybe love emails. Letters can be very good or very bad.

Today, as we start the New Year, I thought we're going to start a series based on a letter that has changed your life and I believe will continue to change your life if you become serious about it. Starting today and, perhaps, the rest of the year, we're going to begin a study on what I consider to be the greatest letter ever written. It was written by Paul and we cannot overestimate the influence of this one letter. This letter is what we refer to in the Bible as the Book of Romans.

Listen to these quotes from different people:

Richard C. Halverson, Presbyterian Minister and Chaplain, U.S. Senate: "In a very basic sense, western civilization is a by-product of Paul's letter to the Romans...Nothing was written by man has had a greater impact upon modern history."

Frederic Louis Godet, Swiss Theologian and Author: "It is probable that every great spiritual revival in the Church of Jesus Christ is connected as effect and cause with a deeper understanding of this book, the Epistle to the Romans."

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, poet and theologian: " I think that the Epistle to the Romans is the most profound work in existence."

John Calvin, reformer and theologian: " If a man understands it he has a sure road opened for him to the understanding of the whole Scripture. "

Martin Luther, reformer and theologian: "Romans is the chief part of the New Testament and the perfect gospel."

You just can't say enough about this book. It's the basic handbook for Christianity. It has influenced hundreds of thousands, millions of people. It has changed history. Augustine became a Christian because of the book of Romans. Martin Luther started the Reformation because of the book of Romans. John Wesley was converted upon listening to the reading of Martin Luther's "Preface to the Epistle to the Romans". All throughout history, God has used the book of Romans to influence people's lives in ways you cannot imagine.

Because of the transformational power of the Book of Romans, I'm calling this series, "Power to Change". It contains power to change lives. Not only of the lost but also of the found who seem to be getting lost amidst a confused and chaotic world. And the first part of the series, which I'm delivering this morning, is entitled, "A Life-Changing Letter". This is an introduction and so this is a bird's-eye-view of Paul's letter to the Romans.

How are we going to get the most out of this series?

1. Be here every Sunday. 😊 But if you can't, watch it on our Facebook page.
2. Be sure to bring your Bible. Whether it's the old-fashioned paper Bible or digital version Bible, bring it.
3. Bring a notebook and pen to take notes or your phone to take pictures of the slides. It's ok to take a picture of me.
4. Write things down. If you do, by the time we get through this series you'll have a complete commentary on the book of Romans.

I figure we'll finish this in 9 months. But it could be a year because maybe we'll take a break because of certain holidays during the year like Valentine's Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving and such.

BTW, I'm not a Bible scholar. I don't claim to be. I'm just going to share with you what I learned from some of my mentors. Like Rick Warren, John MacArthur, John Piper, R.C. Sproul, Ray Pritchard, and a few other famous preachers and writers. So, as I go through this series, and you go like, "I think I've heard or read that somewhere", most probably you have.

I'll be borrowing some ideas and words from my mentors. Sometimes, I'll quote them directly, sometimes not. I don't think anyone is original anyway. Only God is original. The Bible, in fact, says, in **Ecclesiastes 1:9**, "There is nothing new under the sun. *It just gets recycled.*" Ok, that's from the RSE version.

Another btw, we're going through this series verse-by-verse. I've never done this before. This is new to me. And maybe new to you, too. So, we'll try a new thing this new year. Are you good with that? One last btw, there will be Pastor Nonoy, and Brandon, and RJ, and Kuya Alan, who will also preach and teach from this book.

Now, the best way to approach the book of Romans is to start by seeing it as a letter to you. I want us to pause right here at the start and ask God to give us some insight as we look into this book.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, I really feel inadequate as we look at this magnificent book of the Bible. I know that it has so much to say and there is no way we can plumb the depths of this book. I pray that in the next few weeks and months as we look at Romans You would change our lives -- that this would be a life changing letter so we can better understand Your plan for our lives through it. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

When you study a book, you always want to ask at least five questions: Who wrote it? To whom was it written? When was it written? Why was it written? What's the main message?

This morning, I want to give you an introduction to this book, the basic overview of the book. We can't understand the book without understanding these basic things. So, first things first:

1. **Who wrote it? Paul the Apostle.** That's obvious. You see it there, in the very first word of the very first verse of the very first chapter. Paul lived at a time when it was the norm to identify and introduce yourself first in the letter you're writing. In modern times, when we write a letter or an email, we identify ourselves in the end, who we are, what our position in life is, who we work for, our phone no., etc. The ancient Greeks always started out up front telling you who it's from and who it's to. Like a memo. From Paul to you. So, we know it was written by Paul.

Actually, it wasn't written by Paul. It was authored by Paul, but the actual handwriting wasn't from Paul. Look at chapter **16:22 "I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord."** Tertius wrote the book of Romans. He was Paul's secretary. Paul did not write the letter down personally but dictated it. This is helpful for you to understand, because sometimes Paul gets long, long sentences and they're very complex and seem to go on and on . . . A run on sentence. Why? Paul was not sitting there thinking about each word, taking his time to think out the construction but, I imagine, he walked back and forth dictating this letter. Tertius is probably writing it down as quickly as he can, trying to polish each sentence as he wrote, putting periods in.

Where was this letter written? Look at the next verse, **"Gaius whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings."** (Rom. **16:23**) That tells us where the letter was written from. Gaius was a Christian

businessman and he lived in Corinth, a city in Greece. So, the letter was written from Corinth.

Now, let's describe Paul. Who is Paul? Paul was probably the greatest man who ever lived since Jesus Christ. There are over a billion Christians today in the world because Paul was the one who single-handedly took the gospel all across the Roman empire and started churches all around the Mediterranean. He was the most influential man in history since Jesus Christ.

Now, Paul is a product of three different cultures.

a) By race and religion, he was a Hebrew. In Philippians 3:4-6 Paul gives his testimony, "...though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless." Paul says he was the ultimate Jew. He was a pure Hebrew. He was the most unlikely person to be a Christian.

Before he became a Christian, he was a persecutor. He was persecuting the church and stood by while Stephen was stoned—one of the first martyrs of the church. Yet in Acts 9, he was on the road to Damascus, getting ready to persecute the Christians, and God spoke to him in a blinding light. The Lord said, "*Saul, why are you persecuting Me?*" Saul, whose name was later changed to Paul, said, "*Who are you, Lord?*" And the Lord said, "*I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.*" (Acts 9:4-5) At that point Paul was converted.

This is encouraging. Do you know anybody that when you share the gospel with them they get irritated at you or violent and uptight? If that's so, that's good news. They are reacting. And oftentimes reacting simply means God has them under conviction. Often, we can see the people who are rejecting the gospel

violently are really a lot closer to becoming a Christian than those who are apathetic. People who are apathetic are often not even affected by it. If a person gets mad at you for sharing the Gospel, it probably means they are getting convicted.

b) Paul, by culture, was Greek. Paul's parents were Jews who migrated to Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia, a province of the Roman Empire, which is now Turkey. If you were wondering like I was whether he was Turkish being born in Turkey, he wasn't. Turkey didn't exist yet as a country. There were no Turkish people yet. Anyway, Paul was born and raised in Tarsus.

Tarsus is a seaport on the coast of Turkey. There's Tarsus on the map. On the **next slide is Tarsus in relation to Corinth, a city in Greece,** where Saul wrote his letter, and Rome, where his audience was. Corinth is a seaport on the coast of Greece.

What was Tarsus? Tarsus was a great university center. It rivaled Athens. It had one of the greatest libraries of the world. Paul was a highly educated man. He spoke Greek fluently. Greek was the universal language at this time. The lingua franca, just like English today. Even though it was the Roman empire, not everybody spoke Latin, they spoke Greek, regardless of what country you were in. He spoke Greek fluently and that meant he could travel internationally and speak in several different countries.

c) Politically, Paul was a Roman citizen. This is important to understand because being a Roman citizen gave you a pass to the empire that, if you were not a citizen, you didn't have those privileges. Only about one in five people in the Roman empire were actually citizens of the empire.

Now, you could get a Roman citizenship by birth, or if you were wealthy enough, you could buy a Roman citizenship. It's like if you want to become a U.S. citizen, you pay the application fee, right?

In Acts 16:35-37 Paul and Silas had been put in prison. The prison guards did not know they were Roman citizens. *“When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order: ‘Release those men.’ The jailer told Paul, ‘The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace.’ But Paul said to the officers: ‘They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out.’”*

So, Paul was a Roman citizen which came in very handy as he traveled around the Mediterranean Roman empire because it gave him access. Like a pass. The point I want to make is this:

Paul had Hebrew background, Greek background, Roman background. As a result, he was perfectly equipped to be an international minister to the different countries around the Roman empire. What’s the take-away? God often prepares us and equips us for the ministry He's going to give us.

Now, let’s look at

2. TO WHOM WAS IT WRITTEN?

Romans 1:7 *“To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people.”* Paul wrote this letter to the Christians who were in Rome. Paul had never been to Rome at this time. It's different than other letters he wrote. In other letters, he started the church. But here he didn't know anybody—actually a few. In chapter 16 he lists them. But how did the church in Rome get started? Most likely there were some converts of Paul from other cities who went to Rome. When they got there, they started some home Bible studies and began to grow and soon there was a church growing there. Paul writes to them. At this time, Nero was the Caesar

in Rome. Christians were not exactly well liked at this time. They were, in fact, lion food. It wasn't as bad as it got later on.

Paul is writing to the Christians at Rome. He has this overwhelming desire to go to Rome. v. 11 *"I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong."* Then in v. 13 *"I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles."* He said, "I've been planning, dreaming, hoping -- my greatest dream is to go to Rome."

Rome was the greatest city of the greatest empire of the world. It was the strategic center of civilization. Paul had started churches in Corinth, Thessalonica, all over Greece and Turkey and the Mediterranean, but he had never made it to Rome. v. 15 *"That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome."* He had a strategy. He wanted to go to Rome but he wasn't able to go and so he wrote this letter.

3. WHEN DID HE WRITE IT? Paul made three missionary journeys around the Mediterranean starting churches, each of them taking a number of years. He'd go into an area and spend anywhere between six months and two years starting a church, get it growing, and then move on to a new area. Paul wrote this letter during his third missionary journey. So, it happened this way. **Paul, on his third journey, had made it all the way to Greece.** He had started in Antioch in Syria, then he went to Cilicia, then to Galatia, then Phrygia, Ephesus and all the way to Macedonia. In **Acts 20:1-3, we read "When the uproar had ended Paul sent for the disciples and encouraged them. He said goodbye and set out for Macedonia. He traveled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people, and finally arrived in Greece, where he stayed three months."** Where? In Corinth.

In the house of Gaius which is mentioned in Romans 16:23 which I referred to earlier. Gaius was a wealthy businessman in Corinth. Paul spent three months staying in the home of the businessman Gaius in Corinth and while he was there, he wrote the book of Romans, around **AD 56-58.**

Now, although Romans is the first letter of Paul that appears in the New Testament, it is actually the fifth of the 13 letters he wrote to various individuals and churches. And so, his letters as they appear in the Bible are not in chronological order.

4. WHY DID PAUL WRITE THIS LETTER?

There are three purposes why Paul wrote the book of Romans. I think it's important to understand that this letter is different than many of his other letters. In the first place, he didn't start this church. Most of the letters Paul wrote, he wrote to churches he had started. In fact, he had never even been to Rome. Evidently, he did know a good group of members there.

In chapter 16 he mentions them by name and there's quite a long list of people he knew. As we read through the book of Romans, we discover there are very few internal practical problems mentioned. It's the exact opposite of his letter to the Corinthians where in every chapter he mentions a personal practical problem that they were having because he was intimately acquainted with the Corinthian church. But this is closer to a doctrinal statement. It's more systematic, more organized than a number of others of Paul's letters.

Paul had three reasons for writing the letter:

1) There was a personal reason. ch. 1:11-13, 15. The purpose was to introduce himself to the Romans. He was announcing his visit. He intended to come. Simply as a courtesy statement he says, I want you to know that I'm coming. **v. 11 "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you**

strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith...That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome.” Don't you appreciate it when people write ahead and let you know they're coming? This is a personal reason he gave for writing this book.

2) There was an educational reason -- to review and clarify the meaning and basis of Christian living. He wants to clarify the meaning of salvation. 15:15 *“Yet I have written you quite boldly on some points to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me.”* Romans has been called the Christian's constitution. How many of you have read the constitution of the United States? We believe it, we defend it, we'd die for it. Paul is writing the constitution of the Christian life and he's reminding us of basic doctrinal truths to know and understand.

3) There was a financial reason. This is a fund-raising letter in one sense. Paul wrote Romans to enlist support to his trip to Spain. In Romans 15:23-24, *“But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to visit you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to see you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while.”* He's getting financial assistance from the Romans to go even farther to Spain where he wanted to spread the gospel. Did Paul ever make it to Spain? Probably not. There's a possibility he did. We do know that he was killed in Rome. How did the letter get there? In Romans 16:1- 2 we find out how the letter got from Paul to the Roman church. *“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.”* Evidently Phoebe was a wealthy widow that had some kind of

personal business in Rome. So, as she was coming, she handed this letter to the Roman church.

5. WHAT'S THE MESSAGE? The message is the gospel. And this message of the gospel is the theme of Romans which is stated in 1:16-17, *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”* God gives His righteousness to the person who believes in faith. The good news has the power to change lives. It's the power of the Gospel that I'm not ashamed of.

Folks, the gospel is power! The Greek word is *dunamis*, from which we get the English words “dynamic,” “dynamo,” and “dynamite.” The gospel contains the dynamic power of God. That’s why Paul felt no need to apologize for coming to Rome. He knew that in the gospel there is a power that can overwhelm anything the proud Romans might throw up against it.

If you’re a Christian, you have experienced this power working in your life. You know how it has transformed you. You know it has changed your way of thinking, your way of doing things, your way of relating to people, your way of life. But in the passage of time, you may have felt like the power is waning. You feel defeated and may even feel like giving up. Friend, let me encourage you, God’s power hasn’t changed even a little bit. It is unchanging just as Jesus is always the same yesterday, today, and forever.

My prayer is that as we continue through this series, you’ll have a better understanding of the power of God in your life. The Book of Romans contains so much doctrinal meat that should sustain your Christian life and stabilize your walk

with Christ. Being grounded in the truth of God's Word is so important especially today in our society where our faith is under constant attack.

If you're not a Christian yet or you are still investigating the claims of Christ, I encourage you to keep tracking with us. Who knows, this series might just give you the power to change.

And folks, while I'm completing this message this morning at 2:22, this is when I thought what our theme would be for this year. Since this series will take about a year, I thought that our series title would also be our theme for the year. Our theme then is "Power to Change". And the theme verses are the key verses from Romans 1:16-17. Let us read it together:

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'"

And my challenge to you is this: memorize these verses and make them a part of your life.