

## Romans: A Solid Foundation for Christian Living

### Message 1: The Lord We Serve

#### Text: Romans 1:1

Jesus says (Matt. 7:24-27) that the one who hears his words and puts them into practice is like a wise man who builds his house, not on the shifting foundation of sand, but on the solid foundation of a rock. Then, when the storms of life hit, rather than fall flat under the pressure, he or she stands strong. In other words, the key to standing strong through the various matters one must confront in this life is an understanding of and faithfulness to the word of God. We learn about our Lord through His word. And it is when we trust what we know that the Spirit of God moves. As surely as your home requires a solid, hard, and true foundation, so too does the Christian life.

The problem is that many of us just aren't there, yet. I can't tell you how often I am with people at their most trying times, and their hope is shaky because their understanding of God's word is shaky. I know this because of the spiritual claims they make. They say things like, "Be strong. You know that God helps those who help themselves." Or "Hang in there. God never lets you face more than you can bear." Or "Since God loves me, He will never let anything bad happen." Now, all of these statements are well intended. We say them to keep up ours or a loved one's strength. There's just one problem: they are not in the Bible. Well two problems: they are not in the Bible, nor are they true. And, as I think about these and other situations, I can't help but wonder how much of our faith rests on faulty foundations.

Strength for Christian living comes not from religious clichés, but from the truth. Jesus said it was the truth that sets us free. And so, I feel the need in our time together to turn our attention to some foundational truths of God's word. We need to shore up the foundation of Christian lives. We need to strengthen the foundation for Christian homes. We need to raise up a generation of men and women whose faith is on the solid rock of truth, rather than the shifting sand of worldly reasoning. We need... we need the book of Romans.

I have sensed God's call to study Romans for several months, but I must confess that I've resisted it. For one reason, it's a long book – the longest of Paul's letters. One preacher I read spent 17 years in Romans (Martyn Lloyd-Jones), and one of my favorite contemporary preachers has been in the book since 1998, with interruptions for other studies as the need arose. We'll take a similar approach, departing from the book for seasonal studies and to deal with other matters as the Lord leads.

An even greater reason for my hesitancy to preach through Romans is the great depth of its message. In Romans the apostle Paul presents the most detailed account of the gospel.

The Roman church was a church that Paul had not started, nor had he before visited. It was likely started by Jewish Christians who were saved at Pentecost. But over the years, many who had been a part of Paul's ministry over the years had moved to Rome, so Paul had a vested interest in the church. Having not had even one of the apostles – who in the absence of a completed New Testament would assure doctrinal soundness – visit, Paul was concerned that the Romans have a grasp of the truth. He didn't want them building their lives on the shifting sand of well-intended religious clichés. He longed for them to have a strength of faith grounded on the rock-solid foundation of truth. So in anticipation of a visit, he writes the deepest description to that time of humanity's lostness, the nature of sin, and God's great gift of salvation.

The problem is that men far smarter than I am have struggled with what Paul has to say. And so as the Lord led, I hesitated to make Romans the focus of our study. But the longer I hesitated, the more God would impress that this is where we need to be for a while.

See, **Romans has been the catalyst for some of the greatest movements of God in human history.** More than three-hundred years after it was first written, it was Romans that God used to light a fire in the heart of a man known at the time for his pagan philosophy and loose living. But one day, sensing his struggle with sin, Augustine turned to Romans 13, and the Holy Spirit transformed him into the greatest theologian the church had known since Paul himself.

In the 1500's, a German monk turned to Romans, troubled in his conscience over the depth of sin in his life. Pondering the words of Romans 1:17, "the righteous will live by faith," Martin Luther became convinced that salvation came not from any good merit by us at all; it came by faith in Christ alone. And from this conviction came a Reformation that transformed Christianity.

Two centuries later, it was Romans that God used to ignite an authentic faith in a depressed preacher. Discouraged at the poor response to his preaching in America, John Wesley listened to a reading of Luther's study of Romans, and he says, "While he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt that I did trust in Christ alone for my salvation. And assurance was given me that he had forgiven my sins..." Wesley went on from there, becoming a spark that ignited the First Great Awakening in England and America.

I don't know about you, but I hunger for such a movement of God today.

We begin with the very first verse, where Paul introduces himself. It's a typical Pauline intro in many ways, but even more than it describes Paul, this intro describes the Lord we serve. From his very first verse of this most powerful of books, Paul points us to the Lord who stands at the center of its message. And that's an appropriate place to begin our study (read).

Now Paul makes three statements about himself in this intro, but as I said each one points really not to himself but to the Lord. They say something about our Lord which together illustrate what the Christian life is all about. So what does he say?

### **1. Jesus is the one who directs your path.**

Vs. 1 – *“a bondservant of Jesus Christ...”* – the word for servant here is one of many in the New Testament language; this one, however, emphasizes both the will of the servant and his or her dependence on the master. So when Paul says that he is the servant of Jesus Christ, he is saying that...

- He willfully turned from following another master to following Jesus.
- Consequently Jesus is the master, the one who directs his life.

And this is exactly what Christianity is. **This is salvation. It is a relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ whereby we turn away from one master – namely sin or self – and we attach ourselves to Jesus.** Now, we yield our will to His, knowing that His will is always best. So Jesus is the one who directs your path when you trust your life to Him.

Which brings us to the greatest error of the Christian life, and a cause of so much of our frustration: self-reliance. It is so tempting to rely on ourselves when trouble comes, so much so that prayer is an afterthought. And Paul even struggled with this, as we will see in Romans 7. And so the ongoing reminder that as Christians we must give ourselves is that, since we've come to Christ, He is now our master. We yield to Him. We learn His ways and follow them. We rely on His power, His strength, His direction.

We will not always do it. Fortunately, a servant who is disobedient is not disregarded by our Lord. Jesus says, “I give eternal life to them and they shall never perish” (Jn 10:28). But certainly the plan of God is for us to live as faithful servants, discerning His direction and following His will. That's why this study is so significant: so we can learn His plan really is.

### **2. Jesus is the one who gives you a message.**

Vs. 1 – *“called to be an apostle”* – actually the text reads, “a called apostle.” In contrast to many who were self-appointed messengers for God, Paul was one called by God himself and given a message to share. Paul saw Jesus on the Damascus road. Not only was he saved there; he was called to ministry there. In the same way, if you are saved, you too are called by the Lord and

given a message. In Romans 12 we will learn about spiritual gifts, and the different ways that we will share the message of who Jesus is and how He changes lives. One thing is sure: the message is His. When you live for Christ, you embrace His message and share it that others may know Him too.

### **3. Jesus is the one who defines your purpose.**

Vs. 1 – *“set apart for the gospel of God”* – “set apart” – from a word that means to mark off boundaries. And the words are in a form that speaks of past tense with present implications. So Paul's life purpose was defined, the boundaries set, in the past. Perhaps at the time he trusted in the Lord on the Damascus road. More likely, it was even before time began. God chose Paul to be His instrument for reaching the Gentiles. And when Paul embraced that vision, the Lord did many great things.

In the same way, God has a purpose for you. The boundaries for your life are set. God as uniquely suited you for a purpose. But that purpose is not something we create in our own whims and thoughts. We discover it when we know the Lord through His word.

**Conclusion:** Paul says that Jesus does all of these for us. He directs our path as our Lord and Master. He gives us a message, a testimony, a truth that we can share in service to Him. And He has a plan for us by which we will bring His glory and find joy for ourselves as well.

But where do we find this direction... this message... this purpose? This is what I hope we will learn as we walk through Romans together. But for those who can't wait, the short answer is this: we learn it from a love relationship with Him. We learn it as we walk with Him, building our lives on the foundation of scripture, loving Him in worship, and seeking Him in prayer.

The question at this point is, where are you in this relationship?...