

THE LETTER THAT CHANGES THE WORLD

The Apostle Paul had a dream. He wanted to take the gospel to Spain. Because he wanted to go to Spain, he wrote a letter to Rome. I've had a dream. More than a decade ago, I began dreaming about the letter Paul wrote to Rome. I wanted to translate it from the original language into English, study it, write sermonic commentaries on it and preach it. God, I think, gave me a dream and allowed me to live it. I started translating in September 2004. It is now June 2007, and these are my final reflections on Paul's letter to Rome. I have spent a decade or so in the presence of this masterpiece, getting as close to it as I could possibly get but also standing back and taking in the whole. I am in awe.

I have not dreamed in isolation. My dream to preach Romans was nurtured in this church, and my dream was to preach Romans to this church. As I have worked my way through the text, I have felt increasingly connected to this church and its people. Whatever God is doing at Peninsula Bible Church, I'm in the middle of it with you, and we're in this together.

Paul's words to the Romans have been among the most influential ever penned. My belief is that the words can continue to have epoch-making impact. That's why I've called this series "The Letter that Changes the World." How might these ancient words come alive for us so that God might breathe new life into us as individuals and as a church? Because it's easy to lose the forest for the trees in Romans, let's first take in the sweep of the entire letter by considering the major sections and the key verses within those sections. Then I'll share some reflections.

Introduction: The story and power of the gospel (Romans 1:1-17)

Romans 1:1-4:

Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord ...

Romans 1:16-17:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "BUT THE RIGHTEOUS man SHALL LIVE BY FAITH."

Paul signals that his letter is about the gospel, which concerns Jesus Christ, the Son of God, God's king. The gospel is both the story of the Son and the announcement drawn from the story: Jesus Christ is Lord. The gospel is powerful in that it reveals the righteousness of God—that is, his faithfulness to his ancient promises to rescue the world from evil.

God's worldwide family (Romans 1:18-4:25)

Romans 3:21-22a:

But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe ...

Romans 4:16:

For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all ...

Paul describes Gentile sin, which is rebellion against God and allegiance to other gods (Romans 1:18-32). The Jews failed to address the problem of Gentiles sin (Romans 2:1-3-8), especially inasmuch as they also had the same problem with sin (Romans 3:9-20). Paul then shows how God was faithful to rescue both Gentiles and Jews from sin through the faithfulness of one Jew, Jesus Christ, who assumed the task marked out for Israel (Romans 3:21-31). (The word translated “in” in Romans 3:22 would be literally translated “of.” Paul is describing the faith, or faithfulness, of Christ.) The faithfulness of Jesus Christ, culminating in his suffering death, created God’s worldwide family, in fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham (Romans 4). Membership in this family is open to all people in that it is defined by faith in Jesus as opposed to works of the Mosaic Law, which only the Jews received.

Our future with God (Romans 5-8)

Romans 5:1-2:

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God.

Romans 8:32:

He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?

God’s worldwide family may confidently expect a future with him (Romans 5:1-11, 8:31-39). Christ overturned human sin, which was unleashed by Adam’s transgression, in order to create a new humanity (Romans 5:12-21). Christ and the Holy Spirit effect freedom from sin (Romans 6), which the Mosaic Law could not achieve (Romans 7), so that humans are restored to serve God in creation, which will be liberated from its own bondage to futility (Romans 8:1-30).

The story of Israel (Romans 9-11)

Romans 9:6a:

But it is not as though the word of God has failed.

Romans 11:32:

For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all.

If Romans concerns the revelation of the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ, the apparent problem is that the Jews, the people who received God's promises, for the most part have not believed in Jesus. The story of Israel—past (Romans 9:6-29), present (9:30-10:21) and future (Romans 11)—shows that God has been, and will be, faithful to Israel. The gospel therefore stands up to Jewish unbelief. It also undercuts Gentile arrogance in that membership is based solely on faith. Israel's rejection of the Messiah bounced the gospel to the rest of the world so that God's mercy is open to all people.

God's Spirit-renewed community (Romans 12:1-15:13)

Romans 12:1-2:

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 15:5-7:

Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.

God's Spirit-renewed community reflects his glory into the world, implements his victory over evil and shares his love with the world (Romans 12-13). In particular, church members must accept one another, especially across ethnic lines, in order to glorify God together (Romans 14:1-15:13).

Conclusion: The strength of the church (Romans 15:14-16:27)

Romans 15:28:

Therefore, when I have finished this, and have put my seal on this fruit of theirs, I will go on by way of you to Spain.

Romans 16:25-27:

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith; to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen.

Paul wrote the Romans in order to that they would unite behind the gospel and send him to Spain to plant the gospel there (Romans 15:14-33). He hoped God would use the gospel, which he has featured in the letter, to strengthen the church and lead it into shared worship (Romans 16:25-27).

Learn the story; live the story

In Romans 1-11, Paul shows how Christ brings the biblical story to a climax. In so doing, he tells or evokes the stories of the four major figures from the biblical story—Adam, Abraham, Moses and David—and the story of Israel as a whole. As a human, Christ fulfills the Adam story and defeats sin (Romans 5:12-21). As liberator, he fulfills the Moses story and leads his people out of bondage to sin and into the new creation (Romans 6-8). As king, he fulfills the David story and reigns over the world as its true Lord (Romans 1:1-6). As father, he fulfills the Abraham story and creates a worldwide family (Romans 4). As Messiah, he fulfills the Israel story—past, present and future—so that Israel fulfills its destiny (Romans 9-11).

The human story that Paul tells is thoroughly compelling. Humans were created by God to worship him and serve him in creation, but they rebelled against God and fell into the clutches of Satan, sin and death. Israel, God's chosen nation, looks as if it's going to save the day, but it turns out to have feet of clay. The Messiah emerges from Israel as the hero of the story to defeat evil and rescue humans so that they worship their Creator in anticipation of the restoration of all things. It's an epic story of God's love for humanity: "But God demonstrates His own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). It's got something for everyone: It has drama; it has action; it has romance, featuring, above all, God's love for humanity. There's one more thing it has that should interest you: It has you. It's a story about us. And it's not just a story, of course. It's also true.

Interested? Well, tear into the story. Study it, learn it and know it, not only from the New Testament but also from the Hebrew Scriptures, for the gospel story begins not with the book of Romans or even with the book of Matthew but with the book of Genesis. It is true that if you simply read the Hebrew Scriptures, you're reading a story without an ending. It is equally true that if you only read the New Testament, you're beginning in the middle of a story and you will have difficulty understanding of it.

My hope is that our study of Romans ignites in us an unquenchable passion for the word, not simply that we might know it better but that we might know God better and that we might be renewed as a church and strengthened for the task of being his people. For the biblical story, culminating in the death and resurrection of our Lord, is not simply given to us that we might know it (Romans 9-11) but that we might live it (Romans 12-16). All of us, at least from time to time, find ourselves living in the wrong story or getting stuck in one chapter or repeating the same chapter or reverting to an earlier chapter that can never be relived. The true story compels us to encounter the boundless love of God and to lay down our lives for Christ and for others. It pulls us forward in anticipation of the resurrection of God's people and the birth of a new world. The story challenges us, both as individuals and as a church, to get on with it, to get out there and to live on the edge.

We belong to each other

The gospel story inspires faith in Christ. We believe many things, but mostly we believe that Jesus is Lord. Faith means that we belong together, that we are, in fact, supernaturally connected to each other. We are members of the same body and therefore members of each other (Romans 12:4-5). We're part of the same family (Romans 4:16). The Holy Spirit is leading us through the wilderness of this world as we journey together toward the new Promised Land, the new creation (Romans 6-8).

Paul's understanding of the church is markedly different from that of our culture, which sees the church as a dispenser of religious goods and services. In the United States, you go to a church to get your needs met or perhaps to serve other individuals. If it doesn't meet your needs or no longer meets your needs or you identify new needs, or you don't have the kind of impact you desire, you leave your church, but it never occurs to you that you're leaving your family, that you're severing a body part or that you're abandoning your fellow travelers.

My hope is that the book of Romans would help us appreciate that we are supernaturally connected, that we are brothers and sisters in the same family and that we are fellow travelers on the same journey. In ways beyond our complete understanding, we need each other. We have different gifts, Paul tells us; therefore, we must learn to appreciate all our members and their unique contributions (Romans 12:4-8). Historically, the teaching gift has been emphasized at this church. I have no desire to de-emphasize it (especially inasmuch as I think I have it!); I only wish to elevate all the other gifts, for we need them all if we are to glorify God as a church. We need this body and this family and these travelers and these gifts. If we're connected to each other and we need each other, perhaps we can find new ways to live as community.

Glorify God with one voice

The letter to the Romans aims at uniting the church. Unity for the sake of unity, however, is not the aim. Rather, the aim is unity for the sake of glorifying God with one voice. What does it mean for us to glorify God with one voice?

It begins with our worship service. It's easy today to design your own worship service. Download your favorite music and preachers, and you could have a worship service for one. If this is so easy for us to do, and we can eliminate everything from a worship service we don't like, including some people, why do we show up to worship with others on a Sunday morning? Because deep down we know that we need to be part of a worshipping community. We know we must hear not just what we want to hear but what we need to hear. We know we need the word of God, not just the parts we like but also the parts that we don't like. The best expression of our solidarity as a worshipping community is a regular worship service that gathers everyone in the community. The worship service says to a divided world, to the angels and demons, and even to ourselves that we are one people.

At the end of Romans 11, Paul looks back over all that he has written up to this point and worships: "To Him be the glory forever. Amen." At the end of Romans 16, he looks back over the entire letter and he worships: "... to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen." Let's allow the book of Romans to lead us deeper, more fervently and more collectively into the worship of our God.

To glorify God with one voice also involves mission to the world. Our worship service is central, but if it doesn't propel us outward, we are not worshipping correctly. Paul wanted the church in Rome to unify so that it could send him to Spain with the gospel. I hope we will find ourselves newly invigorated for the tasks of reflecting his glory into the world, implementing his victory over evil and sharing his love with the world. In short, I hope the Spirit will lead us and empower us, both as individuals and as a church, to introduce our world to our Lord. As I noted in my first message in this series, the church that seeks healing for its wounds should also be the church that looks outward

to bring healing to the world. If the gospel is doing its work, the church will know that the balm must be shared. If we engage in mission to the world, we might discover how much we need each other.

This year I have sensed the Spirit moving us closer together. In March, the elders and pastors went on a retreat to worship and seek the Lord together. We emerged with a greater appreciation for being God's people together at PBC. Furthermore, the elders and pastors have started meeting on a monthly basis to pray and seek the Lord together. We are seeking to be a church that breaks new ground with the gospel in our world.

The Spirit is moving, I believe, through Jake Dodson, our minister of music and arts. Jake is a thoughtful, theologically sensitive worship planner and leader who builds community while he's doing everything. The Spirit is moving, I believe, through Carol Lind, who has spent years building into this community and is now, as our new missions pastor, leading us out into the world, both near and far. The Spirit is moving, I believe, through Paul Taylor, who next week will begin preaching the book of Haggai, where we find the prophet saying that the Lord stirred up the spirit of the people. The Lord, I believe, is stirring up this church.

Final words

I would like to leave you with one exhortation that comes from two words in Paul's letter. It comes from the end of a list of exhortations in Romans 12. Literally, the command is to "pursue hospitality" (Romans 12:13). We inhabit an inhospitable culture. Particularly in our part of the world, hospitality must be pursued. If we pursue hospitality, if we become aggressively but winsomely hospitable, opening our church and our hearts and our homes to one another and to our world, we will stand out for the sake of Christ. If we're looking for one thing to do to glorify God, let's commit to pursuing hospitality. One simple thing to do is to invite people over to your home for a meal. Pursuing hospitality might not only change this church, it might change our world.

Paul wrote a letter to Rome because he wanted to go to Spain, but he never could have dreamed that the letter would be influential beyond few dozen people to whom he was writing. I've dreamed of preaching Romans to Peninsula Bible Church, but I don't know what God will do with Romans here. The letter has given me the opportunity to do what I feel called to do: Preach Christ into the church. I know that I don't have what this church needs. But I know the one who does. Jesus is Lord not only of this church but of this world. So I've sent him your way on the wings of the greatest letter ever written.

I wonder what he will do.