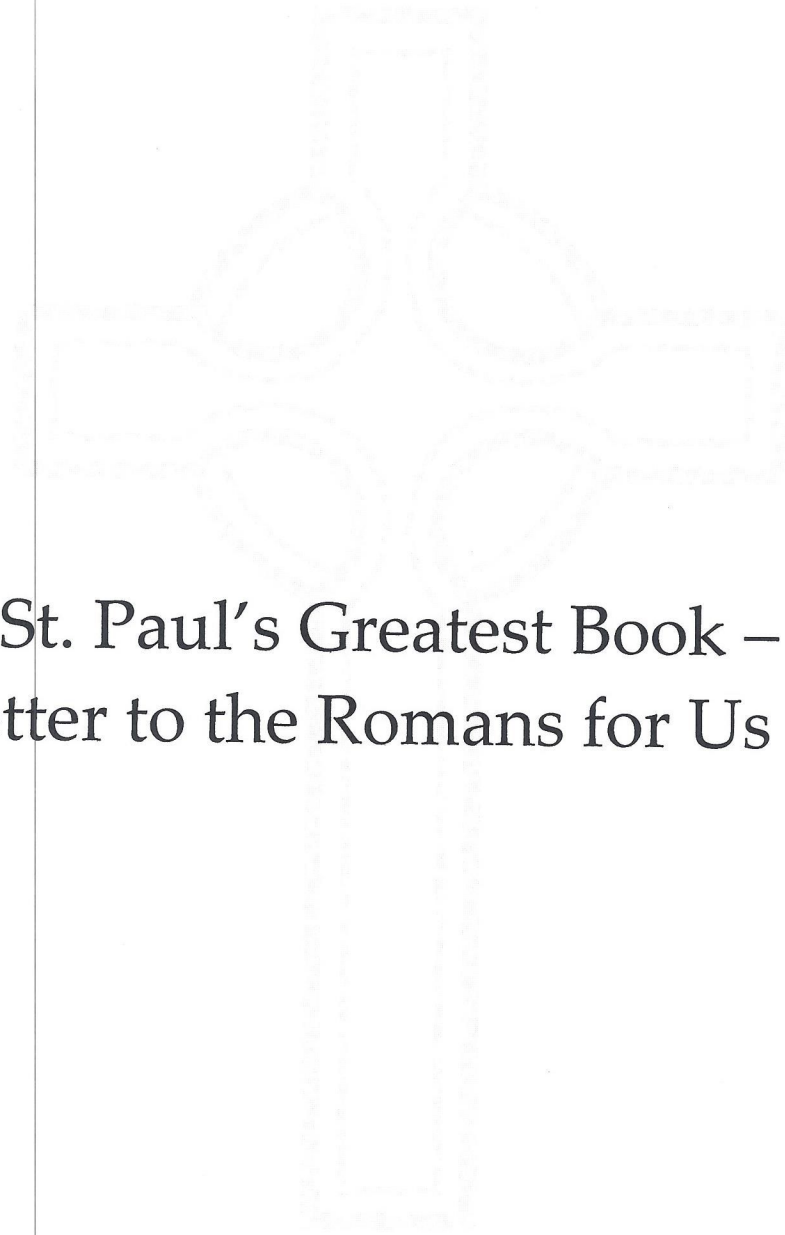


THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH



St. Paul's Greatest Book –
The Letter to the Romans for Us Today

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The Turbulent Line of History

Romans 1

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

Let me tell you a Mother's Day story. Two days ago I was in Seattle. We have two grandsons who live minutes from us; a ten year old and a seven year old. Shirley, their grandmother, promised that she would make a cookbook for our grandchildren of their favorite foods. She already had made one for our children, so she's going to create one for the grandchildren too. So my grandson Drew, who is ten, figured there ought to be a voting system as to what they want in the cookbook, so he developed a numbering system. For anything to be in the cookbook it has to get 14 points. Fortunately all of her desserts have made it in the cookbook so far. I hope some of the main course dishes make it into the cookbook too.

This is the second sermon in a series of messages we're preaching on St. Paul's Greatest Book, his letter to the Romans. Paul has never been to Rome when he writes this book, but he plans to go there. He doesn't know he's going to go as a prisoner, but he plans to go to Rome.

And so Paul writes a letter to them. This letter has probably been the source for more renewals in the Christian church than any other letter in the New Testament. Martin Luther, a young monk who was troubled and in distress, fortunately was assigned a teaching post at Wittenberg, where he taught St. Paul's letter to the Romans. And we know what happened. At Wittenberg, when Luther was teaching the 8th Chapter, an upheaval occurred in his life;

he discovered that there is now no condemnation of sinners because of the saving work of Jesus Christ. That great book became for Luther key to his role in the Protestant Reformation.

Karl Barth had the same experience in the last century. This book was the book that changed his life. It's changed many people's lives. I am so excited that we can now focus on the letter that Paul wrote to the Romans. Last week, our Executive Pastor, Dr. Douglas Learned, began our series by helping us to understand how this and other letters were written to the New Testament churches. The book begins with a great preface. The preface is marvelous. "I am not ashamed of the Gospel," Paul says, "it is the power of God for salvation to the Jew first and also the Greek, for in it the righteous character of God has broken through by surprise, his faithfulness for our faith, as it is written." And he quotes Habbakuk the prophet. "The just shall live by the righteousness of God, the faithfulness of God" (Romans 1:16-17, Habbakuk 2:4). And then with that dramatic preface the book begins. Beginning in Romans 1:18, the feeling of the book becomes totally somber as if you were in a great courtroom. Imagine a vast courtroom. A prosecuting attorney is there, and probably a defense table with the defense, the prosecutor represents the Law and proceeds to prosecute the criminal for crimes, for robbery or for whatever it is that is the crime. The prosecutor stalks back and forth across the room. He speaks first, making the case for the crisis that's before us in that courtroom. And in a way that's how Paul begins the Book of Romans. Romans begins, therefore, in a negative way, because it starts with the prosecutor. Paul endeavors in that prosecution to point out to us the origin of the human crisis, both writ small and writ large. And he does it in this opening chapter. Paul will portray the origin of the human crisis.

In his prosecution he describes the human crisis as fundamentally a breakdown in and among the four relationships that make up a human being. And so in this way, in the first chapter we discover Paul's anthropology too. He borrows it from the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments describe us as human beings in terms of four relationships. Our relationship with God, with ourselves, with the earth and with our neighbors. That's how the human being is described in the Ten Commandments, in both

Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. The first three commandments deal with this upward relationship -- our relationship with God.

Michelangelo, in his epic ceiling painting in the Sistine Chapel, portrays this upward relationship in the creation panel at the very center of the Sistine Chapel. He has man stripped naked and with his continuity with the Earth: he is reaching up knowingly incomplete with his hand, reaching as if for God. And on the other side God is reaching down and Michelangelo's amazing portrayal of man, this sort of everyman figure, is at just the moment before God touches him and makes him a man. It's the creation panel. And it's interesting that there's nothing in Michelangelo's hands. He doesn't have a weapon, he doesn't have gold. He is stretching his hand up to try to discover who he is. And when God touches him, that's when he becomes... not an angel; he doesn't become a god... he becomes a man. And it's an amazing theological portrait of Genesis Chapter 1 and the first three commandments. The first three commandments have to do with our relationship with God "The Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Exodus 20:2). No other gods before me; no emptying of God's name; no false gods, but the one God. God has revealed himself to us in the Bible as the One who touches us; who, by creation & redemption, is our God.

And that is the upward line, it enables us to know that our meaning comes from the God who made us and redeemed us. In the Ten Commandments, the fourth commandment is the commandment that reflects upon who we are. Six days thou shall labor, one day thou shall rest. It portrays man and woman needing a rhythmic life, a boundaried life. It shows man and woman as the "rememberers" -- "You shall remember" (Exodus 20:8). In Exodus 20, we remember God who is the Creator, who made us. In Deuteronomy 5, we are to remember our redemption "You were once a slave in Egypt" (Deuteronomy 5:6). It also shows our relationship to the earth which is another one of our fundamental relationships because in the fourth commandment we see our ecological relationship too. It's the commandment that tells about how the plant life, the animal life, the crops need to have time of rest, just as we need it as well. So there's that sense in which we're to be stewards of the earth in the fourth commandment -- the com-

mandment of the Sabbath.

And then commandments five through ten have to do with our relationships horizontally with the people around us, beginning first of all with our parents. Honor thy father and thy mother and it will go well with you in the land. The first of the horizontal commands, the fifth commandment has to do with those nearest to us, our parents.

The sixth commandment: Thou shall not murder. We are to treasure life. And then the seventh: You shall honor with faithfulness the one that you made a commitment to in marriage. Then the other commands continue to describe our horizontal ethical relationships: You shall not bear false witness; shall not steal; shall not covet. So all of these commands show an anthropology and show the way we were designed. We were designed to live in a positive relationship with God, with ourselves, with the earth, and with our neighbor. Paul, now the prosecutor, starts the book of Romans by saying that the crisis occurs when any of those relationships is distorted or broken. So the human crisis is fundamentally a crisis of broken relationship. Notice how he puts it in his own words.

The wrath of God, [that's one of the judgment words in the New Testament,] the judgment of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness, [see, that's the word that has to do with horizontal harm to others], by which we suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, [and almost sounds like Paul's sermon on Mars Hill.] For what can be known is plain for God has shown it to us. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power, his divine nature, has been understood and seen through the things which he made. So they are without excuse. [In this prosecution now, the prosecutor stalking back-and-forth, pointing to the accused.] They are without excuse. For though they knew God, they did not honor him or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. [He's a stern prosecutor now] claiming to be wise. [Notice his logic] they became fools. [Man decided, "I don't need God; I'm going to create my own gods." And notice that's what happens next.] Claiming to be wise they became fools and they exchanged [that's his key word here] the glory of the immortal God with images [the word icon now here is the begin-

ning of the idolatry language in the Bible] *with images representing mortal men, [humans] birds, animals, snakes.* (Romans 1:18-23)

In other words, what happened that caused the human crisis is when we did not worship God because we chose something else to worship, we desired something else.

Man is incurably religious. If I'm not going to worship God I'm going to worship, first of all, myself; and when that gives way after a while and I don't turn out to be a very good god, so then I worship the bird, the eagle. And every culture in the world at one time or another has worshiped the condor or the eagle. Then when that gives way, I worship the animals, which is interesting. That's fertility worship. You'll notice in Egypt, if you take a trip to Egypt, that many of the smaller pyramids were built for bulls, for animals, as a part of fertility worship. So we worship the animals. And then that gives way; and the saddest part of this decline is then we worship the snake, what we're frightened of. In Egypt they also, at one point, worshipped the cobra. What we're most frightened of we then desperately worship.

We exchange the glory of the immortal God to worship something else: man, birds, animals, snakes. And then confusion sets in with regard to who we are. For two paragraphs Paul discusses that confusion: "Therefore God gave them up to the desires of their hearts to impurity, to degrading their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and they worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator - who is blessed forever." (Romans 1:24-25). Paul here talks about confusion, sexual confusion, the confusion as to who I am because I chose to gain my meaning and identity from my desires instead of from God's decision about me and my worth.

And then harm happens to those around me. "Since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and they were filled with every kind of wickedness," [and now our exchange confusion goes horizontally, wickedness](Romans 1:28-29). By the way, Paul now gives us a list. He's famous for his lists. This is not one of the popular lists in Paul. He has lists of the fruit of the Spirit, remember? He had his list of the gifts

of the Holy Spirit. And he has lists of the ministries that we have because of Christ. Now this is a list of sins, and this is not such a good list.

“So we were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetness, malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, gossip, slanderers, God haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil,” [Is that long enough? The list goes on.] “Rebellious toward parents,” [he puts that in to catch the kids too] “Foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless,” [but the worst is the last rung of the ladder], and “they know that God’s decree is that those who practice such things deserve to die. They not only practice them, they applaud those who practice them” (Romans 1:28-32). Is Paul thinking of the Roman arena with the gladiator games and the total cruelty of the crowd, actually wanting to see blood? They even approve those who do these harmful things. That’s the human crisis in its grimmest face.

William Golding wrote a book a number of years ago called *Lord of the Flies*. In that novel a group of choir boys crash in an airplane on an island. There are no adults around, just these boys. And they realize the only way they can survive is to get a fire going on the top of the mountain so that a ship coming by will see the fire and then will stop and rescue them. It’s almost like an allusion to the Ten Commandments with Mount Sinai and the smoke on the mountain. And so they build a little fire up there but they soon lose interest in it because the boys began to hunt animals to get better food than just the available fruit; they create masks for themselves when they start to worship the hunting instead of keeping the fire going on the high point of the island. It’s a very symbolic book. Because of the masks they eventually can’t even tell each other apart. And then one boy is out there, they see the bushes move and they think it’s a pig and they kill it, but it’s a boy. And then they decide they’re going to hunt boys instead of pigs. Finally, in order to kill one boy, they set the island on fire to try to flush him out. Ironically that fire of their wrath is spotted by a British destroyer which then comes up to the island and finds the boys and rescues them.¹

It’s interesting that Golding’s novel is titled *Lord of the Flies*. Do you know that in the Hebrew, “lord of the flies” is the Hebrew word *Beelzebub*, which is one of the words for the devil? They worship what is evil, and what hap-

pened was they lost their own identity. They became confused inwardly, and that's symbolized by the masks. So they couldn't even tell each other apart. And then finally, they do harm to everything including the earth. They burn the whole island down to try to capture a boy. This harm results in a permanent loss of innocence.

But it is the same analysis that Paul presents here. There is an upward relationship that gives us our identity. When that is lost and we choose to worship something else, maybe it's the hunt, or maybe it's something we desire and then we lose our own identity as God intended for us. We don't know who we are; and when we don't know who we are, the people around us become less important and we do harm to those around us. That's Paul the Prosecutor's case against the human family.

That's not the only thing he says, though. The crisis cumulates in intensity. It doesn't stay put. That's why he has a deteriorating list of idols. And that's why he gives a long list of sins. The sins get worse and worse to where, finally, we're even applauding people who do these things. And so he points out that evil builds in intensity. If you're a *Lord of the Rings* and *Chronicles of Narnia* reader you know that Tolkien and C.S. Lewis made that basic insight a fundamental part of their stories. The ring is evil and every time you give in to the ring it increases its power over you. That's the tragedy line in that story, *Lord of the Rings*. As it grows in its power over you, that power itself therefore needs to finally be defeated. So what is the solution?

Whatever the solution is, it's going to have to do two things. It's going to have to be able to heal brokenness. Whatever is the solution to this crisis that Paul has portrayed, the solution must be able to heal brokenness, broken relationships. And two, it must be more powerful than the building and cumulative terror of the crisis. It must be able to outdistance a cumulative crisis. Listen to the way Paul started the book of Romans. He starts the book with the answer. "I'm not ashamed of the gospel" (the Good News). "For in it is the power of God for salvation." The word "salvation" means healing. It means safety. To be healed so that you're safe. "It's the power of God for salvation to everyone." Oh wait, here's a courtroom scene, there are ten people there, does that mean only four of them have a chance of being healed? No, everyone who trusts it will be healed. "The Jew first, also the

Greek. For in it the righteous character of God has broken through.” Notice in verse 18 the wrath of God has broken through in judgment. But now there’s something even greater than the wrath of God, the righteous character of God has broken through. He’s referring to the coming of Christ. “God’s righteous character has broken through, his faithfulness for our faith, as it is written: “The just shall live by the faithfulness of God.” It will be salvation by surprise. The answer is a person - Jesus Christ.

Well, that’s the solution. Next week we’ll see how it unfolds in the letter to the Romans; though Romans starts as a prosecution, right in the middle of a sentence Paul will walk across the courtroom and become the defense attorney. And then the rest of the story is amazingly good news.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this Good News. Thank you that Paul is so realistic in the way he begins the book that he tells us the way it is, and we see the crisis that has broken us, and we see that the crisis builds, but then there is an answer that is more powerful than the crisis and there is an answer that is able to heal the brokenness. Lord, may we be healed. Perhaps there are some in this room today that feel broken because we have broken relationships and we need to have those relationships healed. Lord, help us to find healing because of your love which breaks through to find us. In Christ’s name we pray, Amen.

1 Golding, William. *Lord of the Flies*. Capricorn Books, 1959.

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Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

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