

# Grace Community Church

OF TULSA

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## Introduction to the Epistle to the Romans

These Expository Notes are devotional in nature and represent the pulpit ministry at Grace Community Church, instead of more polished detailed exposition.

At Grace Community Church we've been on a journey through the Gospel According to Matthew, the gateway book of the 27 books of the Bible known as the New Testament. And now as we approach its end dealing with Holy Week leading to our Lord's crucifixion, resurrection and climactic Great Commission which should take us about 6 months to examine carefully, we want to spend several months on a journey through the *Epistle to the Romans*.

In the history of the Christian church, Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* has been used of God to produce spiritual awakenings, more than any other Biblical book. Swiss commentator Godet, one of about 20 my own study will be working through, puts it this way:

The Reformation was certainly the work of the epistle to the Romans and that to the Galatians, and it is probable that every great spiritual renovation in the Church will always be linked, both in cause and effect, to a deeper knowledge of this book. (p. 1)

So you can understand my excitement, hope, prayer and expectation as we begin our own journey through these 16 chapters, because I'm convinced that America in general and the Christian church in particular desperately needs a revival from God! We at *Grace Community Church* need this fresh breadth of verbal revival to lift our souls to a higher commitment in these dangerous days; we need the awakening into the awareness of God's holy presence; we need our conscience to be smitten by the Spirit with the horror of sin; and we need the delights of

Christ's majesty to replace the world's seductive song.

Every year I carefully listen to the Presidents State of the Union address and this year I went away wondering if President Obama had any understanding of the moral mess we are in! His concluding remarks about the State of the Union being "strong and good and getting stronger and better still," simply seemed incredible! How could anyone, even a politician dare to claim our culture is healthy? We are experiencing the eclipse of our nation; we are seeing the obvious disintegration of the whole of Western culture; yes we are witnessing the approach of the new dark ages, as Charles Colson rightly describes it thirty years ago.

Even a *casual unbiased evaluation* of our culture, adds up to the fact that God's wrath in judgment hangs over America. And we've begun to experience a portion of that judgment in the form of "natural," although perhaps actually "supernatural" disasters, devastating our land. The San Francisco earthquake of 1989 caused \$5.9 billion damage; hurricane Hugo in the same year caused another \$5.9 billion in damage, which were huge numbers in those days; then hurricane Andrew hit Florida in 1992, causing almost \$30 billion in devastation, the costliest natural disaster in U.S. history; this was followed by the Midwest flooding, Southern California fires and mudslides, causing untold billions in loss of property and lives; and then, the San Fernando earthquake, which killed 57 people, injured 4,500, left some 15,000 homeless and caused over \$30 billion in damage. The epicenter

of this earthquake just happen to hit in the area where 90% of the pornography industry in the US is produced (not coincidence). The terrorist 9/11 attack not only killed over 3,000 Americans but caused an astronomical estimated \$1 trillion in damage and economic loss, according to some estimates, rocking the whole financial infrastructure of the United States; then hurricane Katrina hit immoral New Orleans and other areas causing another \$30 billion damage. And in the last several years, the Great Recession, as it is now called, sucked an estimated \$10-14 trillion loss from the American and global stock markets and investments of a whole generation, who have turned away from the Lord God to make the pursuit of money their idol. The Great Recession was not just national but global in devastation and is still wrecking havoc today. As most economists just this week admit finally that our national economy is not recovering but rather heading to the feared Double Dip recession or actual formal Depression. Unemployment is going up, tax revenues are going down, the Federal Government is spending more, the GDP is shrinking and banks because of the housing values plummeting are at serious risk. The cherished AAA rating of the country is soon to be lowered as America is crossing the line of being unable to manage its borrowed interest.

Add to this the growing phenomena of spiritual apostasy among the youth, where they are leaving the church by hundreds of thousands and its hard to come to any other conclusion than the fact that God is trying to get our attention, either by direct devastating judgments or at least, simply taking His protective hand off America. God is calling the nation to repentance, but she isn't heeding the loud wake-up calls! Drive 90 minutes from Tulsa and look at what is left of Joplin after the worst tornado damage since 1953 or the Oklahoma City area and you must realize this is hitting close to home! We desperately need revival in America, a deep long lasting legitimate *spiritual awakening* that will turn us

back to God and instill once again a burden to fear God!

Perhaps the metaphor of a "spiritual awakening" doesn't really define our need today. You may be surprised when you hear me say, I don't think *ethical* and *spiritual apathy* is the precise diagnosis of our condition! I used to think that was it, until I read Martyn Lloyd-Jones book, *Revival*. Insightfully he states...

Oh yes, everybody is aware that there is a need, but the question is what is the need?...here I see a very great difference between today and two hundred years ago, or indeed even one hundred years ago. The difficulty in those earlier times was that men and women were in a state of apathy. They were more or less asleep...all you had to do then was to awaken them and to rouse them, and to disturb them out of their lethargy...What is the problem that is confronting us? I feel increasingly, that as we examine this truly, we shall see that the kind of problem facing us is altogether deeper and more desperate than that which confronted the Christian Church for many a long century. For the problem for us is not apathy, it is not a mere lack of concern and lack of interest. It is something much more profound. It seems to me to be a complete unawareness, even a denial of the spiritual altogether...The very belief in God is virtually gone.

This is the essence of *apostasy*, i.e., the removal of God from the mind or thinking of a culture. Apostasy is the main characteristic of the world in the last days, for Paul laments, "for the Day of the Lord shall not come except there come the falling away first," (cf. 2 Thess. 2:3) a terrible time in which a departing from the Lord both by theoretical atheism and practical atheism. Jesus said, "when the Son of man returns, will He find faith on the earth." The rhetorical questions suggests a negative answer, i.e., He will not! There will be a major departure and godly men

and women, will be in the minority. Perhaps in our *diagnosis*, the *Epistle to the Romans* can help us, as Paul describes the fallen human condition, in these words...

There is none righteous, no, not one: there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. Their throat is an open sepulcher; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace have they not known. [now listen to this!] There is no fear of God before their eyes. (cf. Romans 3:10-18)

Completely lacking, is the “fear of God,” which restrains sin and wickedness. And this also is American culture, void of a conscience and without a holy fear in Almighty God. People today refuse “to retain God in their knowledge,” that is, they block out even the momentary thought of the existence of God by living in a mental stupor. The very belief in God is virtually evaporating before our eyes!

Into this *seared* national conscience, we desperately need the book that has caused revival throughout the ages - the *Epistle to the Romans*. Reflect on its great place in history, just for a moment:

First, it was *the Epistle to the Romans* that Augustine was influenced by. As a young man he was in bondage to sexual lusts, although a professor of literature and rhetoric, who fell under the influence of Bishop Ambrose in Milan. He recalled in his Confessions, “I was twisting and turning in my chains...I threw myself down somehow under a certain fig tree, and let my tears flow freely.” Then he added...

Suddenly I heard a voice from the hereby house chanting...saying and repeating over and over

again, “Pick up and read, pick up and read” (i.e., *Tolle lege, Tolle lege*)...I interpreted it solely as a divine command to me to open the book and read the first chapter I might find...So I hurried back to the place where...I had put the book of the apostle when I got up. I seized it, opened it and in silence read the first passage on which my eye lit: “Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts” (Rom. 13:13-14). I neither wished nor needed to read further. At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled. (Book, VIII, 19-29, pp. 146-153)

This radical and sudden conversion took place in A.D. 386, and it turned him from a life of sin to a life powerfully used of God. It is doubtful if there is a man in Church History more influential than Augustine, who was unexpectedly morally arrested by two verses in the *Epistle to the Romans* and transformed.

Second, it was the *Epistle to the Romans* that Augustinian monk Martin Luther was considering as a young professor after he had taught through the Book of Psalms and then while teaching the *Epistle to the Romans* he also was suddenly morally arrested, as he explains, in his Tower Experience...

I had greatly longed to understand Paul’s letter to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but one expression “the righteousness of God,” because I took it to mean that righteousness whereby God is righteous and acts righteously in punishing the unrighteous...Night and day I pondered until...I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby, through grace and sheer mercy, he justifies us by faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of the Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before “the righteousness of God” had filled by with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly

sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gateway into heaven.

A short time later he launched the spiritual movement throughout the western world, known as the Protestant Reformation, arguably the greatest spiritual revival in the history of the Western world.

Third, it was Luther's *Preface to the Epistle to the Romans* that John Wesley heard in a public reading on May 24th, 1738 that resulted in his sudden spiritual capture by the Spirit of God. He explains it...

...about a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, [Wesley says] I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for my 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.

And John Wesley his younger brother Charles, other members of the Oxford "Holy Club" who joined hands with George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards to champion the great spiritual awakenings in the English world, two hundred and 60 years ago!

It was the *Epistle to the Romans* that captured John Bunyan's heart, who wrote *Pilgrim's Progress*, which has sold more copies since being published than any other book outside of the Bible itself! He immersed himself in the Roman Epistle while in jail and was seized with the fresh power of the Spirit of God, then he picked up his own pen and wrote. *Pilgrim's Progress* and Bunyan's *Holy War*, are allegories of the theological profundity of the *Epistle to the Romans*.

It is the *Epistle to the Romans* that has been used of God to break open the hard hearts of men and women, since the letter was penned in A.D. 57. Martin Luther calls it, "the true masterpiece of the New Testament and the chief part of the New Testament and the very purest

gospel," and required everyone that became a member of his local church, to memorize its 16 chapters word perfect. William Tyndale wrote about it...

I think it meet that every Christian man not only know it, by rote and without the book [or memorize it word-for-word], but also exercise himself therein evermore continually, as with the daily bread of the soul. No man can verily read it too oft, or study it too well.

The great church father Chrysostom who was pastor of the first true mega-church of Asia Minor in the 4<sup>th</sup> century after Christ, held the book in such high esteem that he had the *Epistle to the Romans* read to him twice each week! John Calvin wrote, "If we have gained a true understanding of this Epistle, we have an open door to all the most profound treasures of Scripture." Coleridge said that the *Epistle to the Romans* was "the most profound writing that exists."

About 90 years ago Karl Barth who was educated a liberal but saw that utopian dream shattered by WWI, began to immerse himself in the *Epistle to the Romans*, shrugged off liberalism's errors and returned to theological orthodoxy in a major way. Then as he a converted liberal published his commentary on the *Epistle to the Romans* in 1919 it, "dropped as a bombshell on the theological playground" of Europe and America, as Oxford scholar F. F. Bruce described it. Bruce would write in the introduction of his own commentary on the epistle...

There is no saying what may happen when people begin to study the letter to the Romans. So, let those who have read thus far be prepared for the consequences of reading farther: you have been warned! (p. 58)

The study of the *Epistle to the Romans* is the scholars' lifelong task and the layman's ongoing

challenge. One Puritan called it “the quintessence and perfection of saving doctrine.” (Haller) James Montgomery Boice says, “Romans has probably been the object of more intense study by more highly intelligent and motivated individuals than any document in human history.” (p. 9)

I hope we understand, that as we turn to this timely book of the Bible, we do so with a commitment to let its message *stir* our own spiritual condition. Perhaps too often we play what Howard Hendricks calls, “Ecclesiastical basketball,” by hearing the Word of God and thinking, “So-and-so really needs this; I hope so-and-so is listening, because they really need that.” And we pass it off to them. And unfortunately we never take a shot ourselves.

As preparation for our journey through the *Epistle to the Romans*, I’d challenge you to do what I’ve determine to do, i.e., let the *Epistle to the Romans* speak to my heart in a deep personal way. I find myself as a Pastor in a curious juncture of history, yes a turning point where the eclipse of Christianity is obvious and the dawn of the new dark day is approaching, yes the very approach of the Lord at His Second Coming in Tribulation judgment; I find myself pulling out all stops to be “zealous of good works” and end the game well; I find myself burning with increasing passion to alert the church and primarily Grace Community Church of the emergency of the hour in which we live. I’m 58 years old but finding myself in some ways awakening to the new days of spiritual emergency, finding the war around me intense and calling to a passion, a focus, a fanaticism, a romance with God and trepidation at His wrath. And I intend to Tolle lege, Tolle lege, i.e., to “pick up the book and read”; yes, to “pick up the book and read.” Donald Grey Barnhouse says...

There is in the book of Romans that which will delight the greatest logician and hold the attention of the wisest among men, and there is that in the book of Romans that will bring the humblest soul in tears of repentance to the feet of

the Saviour, will give him the knowledge of the true value of his soul in the light of eternity and a true concept of the dignity of human personality when it has been lifted by the grace of God. (p. 3)

As I study the book and teach it from week-to-week in whatever time we have left, *the first audience* I have is myself, as I dedicate myself to adjust my life and thinking to its message. This is where true revival starts, within each of us! We desperately need to heed *the providential wake-up calls* of Almighty God as a nation but the process begins as we personally heed the message of the Scriptures - and I know of no better place to anchor sound thinking and living than *the Epistle to the Romans*. Would to God, we would each bow before its great message in humble submission to its sovereign Author and pursue with it in mind, that it is for us, to stir us and to bring us back to true piety, i.e., the God centered life that sets the fear of the Lord before our gaze as we journey through life!