

## Title: “Just a Letter?”

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Romans 1:1-6

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**Service Readings:** Is 7:10-17, Romans 1:1-7, Matthew 1:18-25

*Paul begins his letter to the Romans with what Luther once described as something that throws “wide open the door for the understanding of Holy Scriptures.” What did he see in this letter and how does it apply to us?*

### Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

“Just a letter? Just a letter?” Luther couldn’t believe what he was hearing! How could this student, this very student, *his student*, nonetheless, even *consider* uttering such nonsense in front of him! “Just a letter,” he questioned again, exasperated at this point? “Romans is not *just a letter*! It is *the* letter to end all letters! It is the key that unlocks all of Scripture! I don’t even have to read past the first paragraph to prove its worth. Here, just listen!”

He hardly needed to find his copy of Paul’s letter, for he had long since memorized every word of it. But the thought of his student dismissing it so definitively, so casually, drove him to find it in the pile of books that he had on his desk. The student needed to hear Paul’s words; he needed to see Paul’s words; he needed to touch Paul’s words. And after that, maybe, just maybe he would begin to appreciate Paul’s words in the way that Luther had learned to.

Grabbing his Bible from his desk, he quickly turned to this letter. “Here. Right here! Just listen to this.” Luther began to read:

**1** Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, <sup>2</sup> which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, <sup>3</sup> concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh <sup>4</sup> and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, <sup>5</sup> through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, <sup>6</sup> including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, <sup>7</sup> To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

“That’s not even a paragraph but the first sentence! And what a sentence it is! Listen again to this part: ‘His son.... declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.’ That’s what it says – right there! That single phrase throws wide open the door for the understanding of Holy Scriptures! Everything, *everything*, must be understood in relation to Christ!

All of Scripture points to Jesus Christ. All of it. The Old Testament. The New Testament. It all points to him! And what does it point to, exactly? That God sent his son, descending from King David. His son who was God in the flesh came into this world, suffered, died, and paid for the sins of mankind. And *why*? Because of God's grace and mercy, which we receive from him, by the Holy Spirit, through faith in this Son of God. But you know all that. You don't need to read Romans to learn all that. So what is it about this letter that makes it a key for understanding Scripture?"

The student looked blankly at Luther, not sure exactly how to answer or what to say. Sometimes Luther got excited like this and when he did, it was always best to become invisible. But he couldn't do that when he was the one Luther's excitement was being directed at so he had to do *something*. He knew that there was a "right" answer, and it probably was "Jesus" but he was also sure that single answer would be the *wrong* answer at this exact moment. "Um.... Well.... I guess it is that Jesus.... Um, Jesus died and God raised him as a sign of his victory over sin and death... and um.. the Old Testament speaks of Jesus when it talks of the promises that were made through the prophets. And, um"

Luther cut him off: "How long have you been my student? And that is all you can come up with? Yes! Yes. All that is true and right, but you are missing the point of Paul's letter. He is not writing to the church to impress upon them his knowledge of Jesus. His purpose is not academic! It is far greater than that. It is far more *personal* than that. Paul's *aim* is to impress upon them the *why* of Holy Scripture, and in this first sentence, the *why* of Jesus Christ. He is not aiming for their head but their heart. Here in the very first sentence he grabs them by their hearts and he won't let go until he concludes his letter. He won't let go until they feel as personally passionate about Jesus as he does. Here. Right here. Listen: 'including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ...' We have been called by God, himself. It is not by our own doing, it is not by our choice that we have been counted among his adopted. It is by God himself. And *he called us* and *he set us aside* to be his instruments that he now uses to bring the knowledge and the wisdom of the Gospel into the world.

You see? Paul offers us the key to Scripture in this way: by making *personal* the work of Jesus. What he did was *for us*. This is what Paul teaches. First, that we have faith in the fact that through Christ's blood we are released from sin and have forgiveness. This brings peace to our troubled conscience and rest to our soul. Our sins have been blotted out, removed from our record. We stand pure and innocent before God because he views us through the work of Jesus. Second, is this: now that we are forgiven, our natures are to be changed and we are to walk in newness of life. We received this forgiveness in our baptism and we are to live a life that reflects this reality. Some, like Paul, were called to be an apostle. But others, like you and me are called into other vocations. We are teachers, students, fathers or mothers. But whatever we are, wherever we are placed, we are to live a life that reflects the reality of God's grace. We are to live our life in a way that reflects the reality that we now *belong* to Jesus. Do you see it, now?"

The student took a step back and sat down. In his mind he ran through the entire letter. Paul wrote about the righteousness of God throughout the entire letter. He spent considerable time explaining how salvation cannot be attained through anything we do, but only through the work of Jesus. But... but.... Luther is right. Paul also explains in detail the *why* and the response that it should solicit from us if we truly understand and if we truly believe Jesus did this for us, personally. Paul speaks of the foundations of the Christian faith, a faith that we are called to share with the rest of the world. A

faith that we are to live out for the rest of the world to see. “Present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice,” Paul writes. “Do not be conformed to this world.” We are to know, to believe, that eternal life is a free gift that has been given to us through Jesus Christ and we are to respond to this reality every day in our vocations, in our actions, in everything we do. Our God *called* us. Our God *saved* us. Our God continues to *shower* us with his grace. How can we even *consider* taking that for granted!

The student finally looked up, into his teacher’s eyes. He understood what Luther was trying to teach him. This wasn’t just a letter. It was a key, it was a doorway. It was.. It was a letter that he had to read again because it was a letter that seemed to be written directly to him.

And with that, he opened his Bible and began to read Paul’s letter. And today, that truth still stands: it is a letter that describes the personal relationship that Jesus wants with each one of us. He came to earth for us; he suffered for us; he died for us; and he lives again because he wants the same for us. It is a truth worth understanding and it is a letter worth reading.

Please pray with me.

Dear Lord God, give us your grace that we may rightly understand your Word, and more than that, do it. O most blessed Lord Jesus Christ, see to it that our search after knowledge leads us to glorify you alone. In your name we pray.

Amen.

(The prayer is one that Luther wrote)