**Series Title:**

**"OUR DILEMMA: GOD'S SOLUTION"**

**Paul's Letter to the ROMANS: Chapter 1**

***"God, Why Can't You and I Just Be* Friends*?"***

J

eopardy's Alex Trebek would say, "Your category is 'Change Agents.' The answer is…'Three events that divided all of history into *before* or *after*.' (SFX: BUZZ) Contestant #1: "What are the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ!"

Word of those three mega-events, which occurred just twenty-five years earlier, had reached first century Rome. As veteran time travelers, you and I find ourselves back in its noisy, crowded streets, bombarded by a smorgasbord of languages as we weave through the monuments to the Forum where Latin 101 began long before Christ. This vast Empire is populated by barbaric Germanic tribesmen in the north, Jewish scholars, prosperous and cultured Greeks, farmers and, of course, slaves -- 600,000 of them in Rome!

Imperial decrees bombard us like "Breaking News." Lilting poetry is read to *bellissima signorinas* by *romantico signores.* Scholars pontificate in their box seats at the chariot races in Circus Maximus. Philosophers at Aristotle's Lyceum contemplate their respective navels. Sculptors capture this golden age in great stone faces.

Commerce glides over the Empire's stunning network of roads, bridges and aqueducts, still in use millennia later! Roman architecture raises the bar forever. Public baths with gardens and restaurants make the Four Seasons look like Holiday Inn Tukwila.

It was Augustus who'd transformed this bustling metropolis into the Quo Vadis, imperial city of marble buildings we think of today. But not all its inhabitants live large. Far from the courtyards of patrician aristocracy's villas in the hilly countryside, down in the city the common plebeians battle the noise, squalor and filth we find in today's Third World capitals.

Let's check the news: Brutus and Cassius assassinate Julius Caesar. Antony and Cleopatra commit suicide. Caligula assassinated. Rome invades Britain. Nero murders his mom, torches Rome but blames Christians, then orders their persecution. Next he literally *kicks* his wife to death, then takes his own life, and his successor Galba is assassinated. Let's go "live" to Ashleigh Banfield!

From 47-57 A.D. Paul travels the eastern Mediterranean in today's Turkey, Greece and Albania, bringing word that because of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, God has deleted the need for all people to pay for their sins by being permanently separated from God.

Into chaotic Rome comes this letter from a little man ("Paul" means "small") trekking across today's Greece, dictated to his secretary Tertius during his winter layover at Gaius' home in A.D. 57 in Corinth, the Paris of the 1st century. English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge called this "the profoundest (sic) book in existence."

It is deep, logical, exhaustive. And you and I will need God's torchlight to unlock it. As perhaps the New Testament's most important book, it's been called "the Christian's Constitution" since it's the blueprint on which our freedom in Christ rests.

Paul, nee Saul, was an A-list guy in Jerusalem, a supreme court justice who terrorized Christ's early followers … until the resurrected Christ froze him in his tracks while he was hell-bent for Damascus to brutalize more o' them Jesus crazies. God redirects his passion, and Paul (now using his Roman name), empowered by the Holy Spirit, becomes a Roman candle for Christ across the Empire.

In this letter to Christ's people in Rome there's no fence to sit on, no politically correct tip-toeing. Paul sketches our utter lostness and need for a Saviour, God's gracious response, the believer's ongoing battle with sin and how to win it, God's love for the Jews, and practical how-to's for following Christ today.

God speaks to us through this letter, but the most astounding discovery we can make here is simply this: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." **Let's now read Romans 1:1-32.**

***Meet Small Paul***

***Romans 1:1-7***

We've all touched up our resumés too often lately. Paul's opens his with "Christ's *slave*." A Roman slave belonged to his owner for life. Thus Paul calls Jesus his Lord, and opts not to flash his Roman citizenship I.D., but to be known instead as Jesus' bondservant.

As "an apostle *chosen* and *sent* by God to preach the Good News," Paul is saying, "I didn't chase God; in love He pursued *me*, His bitterest enemy (Acts 9:1-19). Carrying "papers" from the King of Kings, Paul is Christ's ambassador to the Gentiles (Romans 11:13), while Peter, James and John deliver Christ's story to the Jews.

This Gospel, Paul explains, has roots in the Old Testament where God's prophets had predicted, with startling accuracy, the coming birth, death and resurrection of God's Son, the Messiah.

This Jesus, he notes, is both human (2 Samuel 7:16) *and* divine (Luke 24:25-27) and is the *only* way to cash in on God's forgiveness -- not through a church, or by living a good life, being a swell spouse or parent, or giving lots of soft money to your candidate.

Now Paul shifts his attention to his readers in the Eternal City of Rome. They're mostly Gentiles, with a few Jews who'd probably been in Jerusalem at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit arrived, empowering the apostles to announce the Gospel, U.N.-style, so that all the foreign visitors could hear it in their own tongues.

Paul's approach to new people is to say, "My name's Paul; I'm with Jesus; and I've heard some neat things about YOU!" We do the same today, but more like "Hi, I'm Ralph. Hey, why don't the Dawgs stick to playing community colleges instead of the Pac-10, huh?"

Next Paul dives into perhaps the most detailed description of the Christian faith found anywhere in the Bible.

***Paul's Postcard from the Edge***

***Romans 1:8-15***

Historian Tacitus writes, "Into Rome flow all the things that are vile and abominable, and they are encouraged!" It's Rio on steroids. In this immoral sinkhole Paul's readers are known Empire-wide for serving Christ first, then Caesar.

Paul's been itching to get there. (Acts 18-28 describe his journey.) He wants to teach them the full implications of the "good news" -- a phrase meaning an exciting report. It doesn't get any more exciting than "God loves and welcomes sinners!"

***What Are You Ashamed Of?***

***Romans 1:16-17***

Here's the cornerstone of Paul's letter. In the original Greek he writes, "I am not *ashamed* of" this life-changing message since it *alone* beams the very power of God into your life!

Think of the flacks on TV who provide cover for their political bosses' shameful shenanigans. Paul wasn't bashful about Jesus. Why do we find it risky to say the J-word? We can say "The Big Guy" and "The Man Upstairs," but NOT "Jesus." Could it be because there really *is* "POWER" in that name???

Paul's phrase, "The just shall live by faith (Habakkuk 2:4)," would ignite the Reformation fifteen centuries later, shaping western civilization by clarifying *how* to be, as Jesus put it, "born again." Paul's point: **God's righteousness is *given* to those who put their faith in Christ** (Galatians 2:21, Philippians 3:9).

***Welcome to Sinnerama!***

***Romans 1:18-32***

Trained in civil and religious law, Paul builds his brief for our sinful human predicament … and the need for a holy God to intervene if we're to have any hope. From Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:17-19) down to us, no one exposes sin more vividly than Paul.

Later he reveals that, thanks to Christ, God has decreed forgiveness for all our sin, offering it freely regardless of race, creed, color, gender, whatever. This "salvation" can never be *earned*, only *received* by faith, instantly giving us right standing before God as He pronounces us "Forgiven!"

But before rolling out the Good News, Paul gives us the Bad News: every single one of us, all mankind and womankind, are sinners in God's sight. No one, he contends, is exempt from God's wrath toward sin since all have failed to acknowledge and obey their Creator. We prefer to live our way rather than God's. Without God's help, we're cut off from Him -- nevermind how religious we might be! Short of surrendering our life to Christ, we all deserve God the Righteous Judge's penalty of being separated from Him forever, and relegated after physical death to a real place that the Bible calls "hell." Paul says, "Face it, only Christ can save us."

He says down through time everyone's been exposed to God because each of us, from **A**borigine to **Z**ionist, has seen evidence of Him in creation (Psalm 19:1-4), conclusive proof that a Master Designer brought this into existence, not a chance intergalactic explosion.

Can "nothing" produce "something?" Were the intricacies of our brain created by luck or Intelligence? The Bible says, "The fool has said in his heart, 'There's no God'" (Hebrews 11:6). Yet man chooses to ignore God, or to re-create Him in distorted images based on our own liking. There's a dramatic difference, Paul pleads, between "the God who *is*" and "the God we *want*." He's not a build-to-suit God.

And it doesn't sit well with Him to have His Truth tampered with because He's totally holy, totally righteous, totally sinless. He won't tolerate sin, and sooner or later He'll exact a penalty for it.

Since He won't force Himself on us, Paul says He's just released us to pursue our own sinful desires. We apparently want to go our own way, so He lets us exchange His wisdom for our sophisticated foolishness that places us, not God, at the center of our universe.

Per Paul, we've made these trades: (1) instead of honoring the true God, we go for manmade idols like success, fame and greed; (2) instead of living His way, we twist God's beautiful design for sex (Leviticus 18:22; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11); (3) instead of accepting His Truth, we buy satan's lies about God and revere things He's created, instead of the Creator Himself.

We see the products of our sin and bad choices everywhere. Strangely God often gets the bum wrap for them. We assert our independence from God, but, by God, we demand that He protect us! And then we give Him what-for when we think He doesn't.

Some ask, "If every soul everywhere intrinsically knows there's a Supreme Being, why must they also believe in Jesus? Why is He the o*nly* way to God? Isn't this just Bible-banging bigotry?"

In the 15th century Columbus *knew* deep down that the world wasn't flat, even though prevailing thought was against him. He could've gone to his grave *believing* there was a New World, but there was only one way to get there. Just *knowing* it was there wouldn't *get* him there. No planes, no email, just a boat. There was only one way. So he trusted that boat, and aren't we glad!

God *does* exist. There *is* life after death. There *is*  heaven to gain and hell to avoid. Just being *religious*, says Paul,is not enough. And because He chose to, the Bible says God has arranged for only one Boat to get us from this world into His eternal presence. Happily, that Boat can't sink because He walks on water.

***He Hates It When That Happens***

Paul bluntly states that God *hates* sin. How can a loving God hate? He hates whatever threatens those He loves -- and that's each of us.

We saw His wrath toward sin when the big flood came. Noah's ark had only one door. And God says there's only one way to be saved from His judgment. The "ungodly" chose not to enter the ark. Ungodliness has nothing to do with what we do or who we are; it's merely leaving God out, checking Him off as irrelevant. Uncola = no cola, Ungodly = no God.

The Gospel, drawn eloquently by Paul, demands a response. It's God's power in a bottle, His brand promise, but it can only be ours by believing it with both head and heart. As Paul writes, our only other option is to suppress it and face God's wrath.

Our response determines our destiny. Without Christ, we have no hope beyond the grave. But God has a personal gift for us: eternal life. He wants us to join His family. If you've never stepped into His boat bound for this brave new world, just tell Him now….

"God, I don't find any wiggle room in this first chapter of Romans. And frankly I'm tired of wiggling. I agree with you and Paul that I'm a sinner, that I need You to save me from my sins, and right now I'm stepping into Your boat, receiving Your total forgiveness, and trusting You alone for the rest of my journey. Thank You, Father."

His Deal

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