

“Step 1 - A Changed Heart”

Romans 8:1-4

What's the message of Romans 1-8? As we read through Paul's careful arguments and explanations in these chapters it's easy to lose sight of the great truths he's explaining to us and the good news of how it all applies to our lives. We can get lost in theology and miss his main points and how they fit together. In the first half of his letter he not only explains God's plan to rescue sinful people, but he also explains God's plan to transform forgiven sinners into sons and daughters with hearts as pure and holy as His (Ro 8:29). In other words, God hasn't just forgiven our sins, He has also set us free from our sins so we can live fruitful lives, free from the control of our flesh and the devil. He didn't just command us to be holy and then leave us on our own, but He provided the power we need for that to happen. Yet the process isn't automatic. It doesn't happen without us playing our part and that's what Paul's trying to teach us.

What we begin today will undoubtedly take several more weeks to finish. First, we'll summarize the wonderful messages of chapters 1-8, and then turn to a series of practical steps designed to help us learn how to be free from bondages and run the race God has set before us (Heb 12:1).

A. The Message of Romans 1-8

1) Here's the problem

- Romans 1: People without the Bible need to be saved. They've worshipped the creation, not the Creator and have violated their consciences.
- Romans 2: People with the Bible need to be saved. They know right from wrong but hypocritically sin anyway.
- Romans 3: Everybody needs to be saved. By God's standard we're worse than we realize.

2) Here's the solution

- Romans 4: There is only one way to be saved, and there has only been one way since the beginning of the human race. It's the righteousness God gives to those who have faith.
- Romans 5: Here is what God had to do so He could justly judge sin and yet still forgive people and give them this righteousness.

3) Here's how He changes us to be holy

- Romans 6: Does the gift of righteousness mean God doesn't care if we become righteous in our daily lives? No, His gift has freed us from slavery to the appetites and temptations of our flesh so we can obey Him.
- Romans 7: As a Christian I have a new heart that wants to obey God. I love His ways but I find there are still forces in my flesh that hold me captive. How do I get free?
- Romans 8: The key to freedom is learning to draw on the power of the Holy Spirit who now lives inside us. This is something I must learn to do, it's not automatic.

4) Here's the depth of His commitment to us while we're being changed.

- Romans 8: Even though I still struggle and fail as a Christian, the righteousness God gave me because I have faith does not fail me. Through it all I continue to be loved by God and saved.

B. Foundational Truths

God's mercy to me doesn't mean He has dropped His standards. His goal is still the same: people who share His "image and likeness" (Ge 1:26; Ro 8:29). He is determined to bring "many sons (and daughters) to glory" (Heb 2:10). What changes when we come to Christ is:

1) Our position: We are now holy in God's sight, not sinners, even when we sin.

2) Our freedom: Because we have died with Christ by faith we are no longer slaves to sin. We are free to obey because:

- We have died to the Law so God can bless us. (You can only kill a person once and we've already died.)
- We have died to sin (rebellion, independence) so our repentant spirits now want to obey God.
- We have died to the devil. He can no longer accuse us nor has any right to harm us because with Christ we have been put to death for our sin. God won't judge us because Jesus intercedes for us.
- We can now choose to die to the flesh because we have constant access to a far greater power so our spirit can rule our body (rather than vice versa).

So, what holds us back from complete transformation is that we don't consistently believe these truths or know how to access God's power. Some practical suggestions as to how to do this is what follows:



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C. Steps to Freedom

I find myself constantly talking to people after service who are dealing with temptations, addictions, depressions, etc. and I hear myself saying the same things over and over again. And I've noticed I keep using Paul's teachings from these chapters of Romans to explain how to find freedom, so I've decided to do a series on this subject covering key lessons I've learned in the hope that it will be of help to you. Here are some of the topics I plan to cover:

- A changed heart
- Hitting bottom
- The real question
- The importance of hope
- Life skills
- The gift of pain
- Recognize the source
- Cleanse the leaven
- Flee, don't fight
- The tipping point
- Freedom is not enough
- Beautiful scars

D. A Changed Heart

Paul teaches that it is not enough to want to do the right thing because there are forces holding onto us that prevent us from doing what's good and provoke us to do what's bad. We desperately need God's help to be free, but to receive this help we must first come back to Him by submitting our will to Him and receiving His mercy.

As human beings we are all born into this world with a rebellious nature. When Adam and Eve rejected God's authority they gave the devil the opportunity to control us through our flesh, and he does so very effectively (Ro 5:12, 18, 19; Eph 2:1-5). This is why there are three things we must do before any of the other steps will work:

- 1) Repent: Choose to trust God and submit to Him.
- 2) Believe: Passionately cling to Christ's cross and resurrection as the payment and victory over my sin. Believe that in Jesus, God gives me all His resources.
- 3) Receive: Reconnect to God by welcoming His Spirit to dwell inside me. He brings the power I need to be free.

Before we go any further, let's examine our hearts.

E. Questions

- 1) What area of your life would you say has changed the most since you were born-again?
- 2) Name an area of your life where God has set you free.