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The Roman Road: An Introduction to the Author

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Romans 1:1-7 (ESV)

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh 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, 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, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

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.

Well, I am so excited to be embarking on this journey called The Roman Road with you, traveling through this letter that Paul wrote to the believers in Rome. He's once known as Saul. And of course, this letter is probably the most extensive description of the Christian life, the transformation that can occur through the work of Jesus, what Jesus accomplished for us, and then practical instructions on Christian living in our world. In all of the letters in the New Testament, it is said to be sort of the Magna Carta of doctrine.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge called the letter to the Romans the profoundest piece of writing in existence. Martin Luther, the one who started the Protestant Reformation, says it's the chief book of the New Testament. It deserves to be known by heart by every Christian. John Chrysostom said, it's never been outdone in eloquence. It's called the Cathedral of the Christian Faith. Sid Lowe Baxter wrote, This is Paul's magnum opus, the most important book in the Bible. More than any other, it has determined the course of Christian thought. I mean, it's one of the grandest books in the scriptures, and I want to remind you today that Romans

was actually written, co-authored by, you might say, three authors. We understand that Romans being a part of the Scripture was inspired by God Himself. I mean penned by the very Spirit of God.

All Scripture is God-breathed. We know this. It's breathed through human beings, the pen, the papyrus paper, the writing in through the spirit and the soul of men down through history. And one of them was Paul. So God authored this book through Paul, who was once known as Saul. It has been said that Romans was most likely written from the city of Corinth, probably while Paul was on his third missionary journey. As Lewis Johnson wrote these descriptive words about the writings of Romans, it was in the winter in the city of Corinth, the Vanity Fair of the ancient world, the Paris of the first century. Two quiet and dignified men, guests in the house of Gaius, a Christian businessman there in Corinth, sat down to engage in the work of correspondence, writing this letter to the believers in Rome.

Paul, the older of the two, a man who appeared to be in his late 50s at this time, prepared himself to dictate a letter to the younger, whose name was Tertius. The words on the paper scroll which flowed from the hand of Tertius would be sufficient to change the course of the history of the Western world. These two men undertook a mutual project to write a letter in the winter of AD 57. Paul himself had a scroll. As he formulated this letter, a younger man penned it for him, and then it was sent off to the believers in Rome.

I want you to understand today, as we dive into this letter a little bit about this man named Paul, who was once known as Saul. The very first thing he writes at the beginning of this letter, or his scroll pens for him, is it's Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, a servant of Christ Jesus. But it was not always so when he read about this man named Saul before he became Paul in the book of Acts. And we learn a lot about him there. He was a passionate man, there's no question. This man was deeply passionate. We learn about him first in Acts chapter seven when Stephen is giving witness to the resurrected Christ before the Sanhedrin, which was a governing religious body in Jerusalem. And as he lays out the history of the people of Jerusalem's rebellion against God, they become angry with him and stone him.

And we pick it up here in Acts chapter seven, verse 51, when Stephen says to them, 'You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears, you're not open to hearing from the Lord. You are just like your fathers. You always resist the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Almighty God. Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the righteous One.' Speaking then of Jesus again, the one who came

that they crucified him. And now you've betrayed and murdered him. He says to them, 'You have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it.' When they heard this, Acts chapter seven, verse 54 says this, 'They were furious, gnashed their teeth at him.' Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see heaven open, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.' God was touching Steven in this moment where he was before the Sanhedrin, and he was now about to be persecuted and martyred for the Christian faith. It's a reminder to us that God sees all and he knows all. And the Scripture says this. 'At this, they covered their ears and yelling at the top of their voices.' I mean, they became a mob. They all rushed at him. I mean, we see this happen in the world today. People can lose their minds. And it's just a reminder that we're in a spiritual battle and we can lose our bearings, our compass, as the Sanhedrin did here. They covered their ears and yelling at the top of their voices. They all rushed at him and dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.

Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. Here, we're introduced to the writer of many of the letters in the New Testament known as Saul, who would become Paul. Here he is a young man. While they were stoning Stephen, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he fell asleep. And then we hear again about Saul. 'Saul was there giving approval to his death. And on that day, from there forward in Jerusalem, persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered through Judea and Samaria. This is when the church started to spread through persecution. Godly men buried Stephen there and mourned deeply for him. But Saul, this author we're getting to know, began to destroy the church. I said he was passionate. He began to destroy the church, going from house to house. He dragged off men and women, men and women who knew the Lord Jesus, who claimed to be followers of the way, and he put them in prison. It is clear to see that Paul is a passionate man.

Now we pick up his story again in Acts chapter nine, and we see something else about Paul. He's a man who had a powerful conversion. He was still breathing out murderous threats as the days went by. And the believers in Christ continued to share the news of the resurrected Christ. Saul was still tormenting them and trying to intimidate them and bully them. And then he went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, some 140 miles away. He was a passionate man. He would travel for miles just to eliminate Christianity, to get rid of Christians. He asked for a letter to the synagogues in Damascus so that if he found any there who belonged to the way, followers of the way, followers of Christ, whether men or

women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem, haul him all the way back to Jerusalem, and he's on the road to Damascus to persecute the church, fighting against the church, breathing out murderous threats against the disciples of Christ.

And as he nears Damascus on his journey, suddenly the Scripture tells us, a light from heaven flashed around him. Now, this is sort of a divine normalcy when heaven opens up, there's light. This is the God who is light. There is so much testimony to those who've had near-death experiences or encountered something with the law. Even, you look at the Christmas story. You see the divine nature of this encounter. Suddenly, a light from heaven flashed around him, and he fell to the ground. And he heard a voice say to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute other versions?' Say, 'Saul, Saul, how long will you kick against me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' Saul asked. Now Saul was persecuting followers of Jesus, but yet now he understands he's encountered a Lord. He's encountered an authority. Someone strong, someone mighty, someone who's knocked him to the ground. A light flashed around him and this voice says to him, 'Why do you persecute me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' Saul asked. 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. 'Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.'

The men traveling with Saul, they stood there speechless. They heard the sound, but did not see anyone. So Saul got up from the ground, and when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind and did not eat or drink anything. We're getting to know a little bit about this man named Saul, who would become Paul and write this letter to the believers in Rome, in Damascus. Then there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called him in a vision. 'Ananias.' 'Yes, Lord,' he answered. The Lord told him, 'Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street, and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying, and in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.' 'Lord,' Ananias answered, 'I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem, and he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.' But the Lord said to Ananias, 'Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings, and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.'

Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus appeared to you on the road as you were coming here. He sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' Immediately something like scales fell

from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. The Scripture then tells us Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. He was going there to kill him, and this powerful conversion now has him becoming friends with the disciples. He's been through a miraculous transformation, and his eyes have been opened to see now the reality of the Christ. It says at once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, 'Isn't this the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?' Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.

After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him. But Saul learned of their plan day and night. They kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him, but his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall. And when he came back to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples there. But they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord, and that the Lord had spoken to him. And how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He talked and debated with the Greeks and Jews, but they tried to kill him. When the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. Here's a man who's passionate, we see, who had a powerful conversion and is deeply persistent. I want you to know these things about Paul as we get into his letter. When he opened his letter and said to us, 'Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus,' he was not kidding. This is who he was. And he was told how much he must suffer in his service to Christ. I want to end today's message just sharing with you some of what the Scripture tells us about how this passionate man, who had a powerful conversion, persisted for Jesus throughout much of his life, up into his 50s, before he wrote this letter. He says to those in Corinth, he says this five times I received from the Jews 40 lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. I spent a night and day on the open sea. I've been constantly on the move. I've been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles, in danger from the city and danger in a country. In danger at sea and danger from false brothers.

I've labored and toiled and often gone without sleep. I've known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food. I've been cold and naked besides everything else. And this is after he

traveled and had many conversions. Sharing about Jesus, he said, 'I face daily the pressure of my concern for all these churches and all these cities are.' This was

a man who I can't even totally get my brain around his life. And we're going to learn from his letter to those in Rome, this passionate man who had a powerful conversion and persisted in following Jesus through great resistance, great pain, great suffering. He is a model for us, friends, in the likeness of Christ Himself. I mean, we have much to learn from Paul. I hope just hearing about this. It excites you about learning from him in his letter. Let's pray together, father, as we embark on this year and look through Paul's letter to those in Rome, speak to us in a way that only you can open our hearts. May our hearts be circumcised, cut open our ears, cut open so we can hear from you in this year, be taught by you, be instructed by you. For all of this scripture is breathed by you. And it's useful for teaching us, instructing us, and training us in right living. Give us ears to hear, father, we pray it in Jesus name. Amen.