



March 6, 2024
A Note from Pastor April

Dear Friends,

There are a couple of things that might just cause your Lead Pastor to start doing cartwheels around the church in excitement...

A teenager showing up to a Bible study on Romans chapter 8.

Young adults discussing the Lenten sermons to such a degree that they reach out over email to get clarity on their confusion.

(Can you tell that both of these things have happened in the last week?)

This Season of Lent, we decided to take on something BIG and somewhat daunting... trying to understand the heart of our Christian faith through Paul's letter to the Romans.

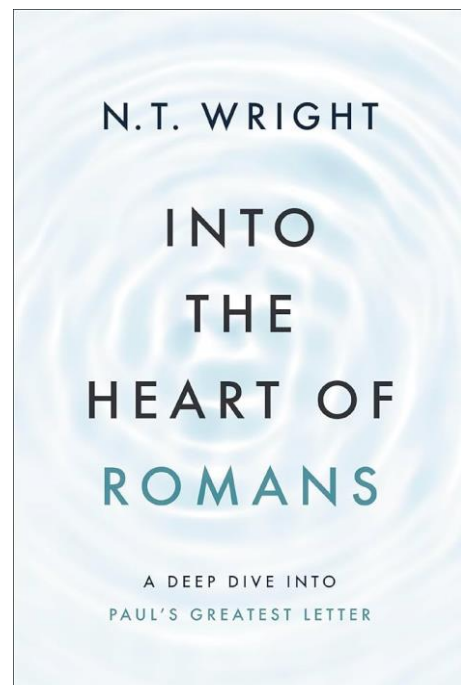
I'm going to make a bit of a confession here.

I've been studying the scriptures for the last 25 years, both personally and with the wise guidance of seminary faculty and biblical scholars. I'd like to say I have a handle on a lot of the big themes in the Bible.

AND...

Preparing for this series of sermons has taken more mental energy and study than any series in recent memory. (And I am infinitely grateful for N.T. Wright's book, *Into the Heart of Romans*, which has illuminated many of the complexities that I might have missed.)

The apostle Paul is trying to do something quite remarkable in this letter to the Roman church, and



certainly in Chapter 8. It's the only letter that he writes to a church that he didn't help found. It's also a letter written later in his ministry after he's had some time to work a few things out theologically. What he offers the church in Rome is a concise theological understanding of the Christian faith, with a depth of focus on what it will mean for them and for all Christians to live life "in the Spirit."

The result is a dense, wordy, and (quite frankly) complex book of the Bible filled with beautiful explanations about the heart of our faith, but packaged in a way that can be hard to understand.

By the time you read this Letter of Encouragement, you will have heard three sermons on the first 17 verses of chapter 8 from three different preachers.

In case you are feeling just a bit of confusion here about how each message ties together, here are a couple of broad themes.

Big themes for the whole chapter:

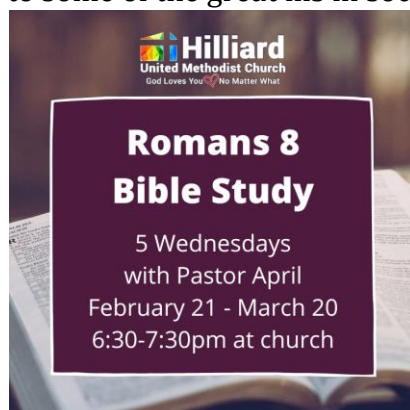
- There is NO condemnation for those in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1).
- Nothing can separate us from the love of God, in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:39). (We hope you recognize that last verse, which is the verse that Warehouse 839 is named for.)

In the first week of this Lenten sermon series (February 18), Pastor Jon looked at Romans 8:1-8, which is about ORIENTING ourselves to LIFE in the SPIRIT and *not* to LIFE in the FLESH.

What the flesh is NOT — your physical body (which is a good gift from God), or a laundry list of things you are always tempted to avoid.

What the flesh IS — the sinful tendency within ourselves to operate in ways that are outside our divine purpose.

Pastor Jon talked about the many ways that an orientation and mindset on the flesh leads to some of the great ills in society. War, poverty, greed, and trauma are just a start of the long list we could make.



Paul has a clear message for the church. **Your MINDSET matters. ORIENT your mind on the things of the SPIRIT. That is what will lead to life.** The ORIENTATION toward flesh only leads to death and destruction.

Our Bible study on Wednesday night last week had a robust conversation about how this shows up in our real lives. We ended on a great example.

Imagine that before you is an indulgent and large and rich piece of chocolate cake. In the first scenario, you eat the cake in secret and solitude and immediately feel a great deal of shame and self-loathing toward yourself for the extra calories and sugar your body didn't need.

In the second scenario, you gather around the table with a group of friends, where you are enjoying one another's company, laughing, and building community, each enjoying your piece of cake with delight and savoring each bite.

Same piece of cake. Same process of eating it.

Which scenario are you "in the flesh," and which scenario are you operating more in line with your divine purpose?

Some religious teaching has leaned toward the first reaction to the cake as more "faithful."

I contend that Paul argues the opposite. There is no condemnation in Christ Jesus. The shame and self-loathing don't have a place in the kin-dom that God is building.

The difference lies in the MINDSET and the ORIENTATION, not in the specific action.

This was a great focus of week two (February 25), as we read Romans 8:9-11 —

YOU ARE PEOPLE of the SPIRIT.

Life in the Spirit is about an IDENTITY. If you are oriented toward life in the SPIRIT, then you will also begin to better understand that the life in the FLESH is not who you are. The tendencies to move away from God, to do things that destroy, to shame and judge ourselves and one another... these are not who we are in Christ.

Our identity lies in the SPIRIT. If we get too caught up in trying to get everything right and follow every little rule to somehow become perfect in God's eye, we are missing the point.

Which is where Paul heads in week three (March 3), in Romans 8:12-17 —

YOU ARE GOD'S CHILDREN.

We are *already* children of God: heirs to the promise and beloved participants with God in the work of building a new creation.

We spend a lot of time striving to be accepted, loved, or forgiven... something we ALREADY are.

This coming Sunday, we'll move into verses 17-21, as **Paul begins to talk about the importance of the work of building a new world.** Creation is groaning and crying out!

It seems that Paul is asking us a new question: **If you fixate your focus on Christ and the Spirit and not on the sins that have already been forgiven, how much more creative energy will you have to make things right in the world?**

How much more able will you be to take responsibility for the mistakes you have made? Own them and face them AND move on to build something new so that we don't perpetuate them?

I cannot tell you how delighted I am at the wide range of ages and folks in our congregation who are engaging with these texts, asking good questions, and pushing back when they don't agree with what is being said.

I'm convinced it's the only way to begin to understand the depth of what Paul is trying to say to us.

I'm delightfully on this journey with you, as we lean into understanding this rich text and as we wrestle, listen, and ORIENT ourselves to this LIFE in the SPIRIT.

It's so worth it!

Note: It's not too late to join one of our Romans 8 Bible study groups. Stop in as you're able: Pastor Jon leads one on Wednesdays at noon in our Warehouse 839 building (room 6; enter through the church office door on the north side of the building), and I lead one on Wednesdays at 6:30pm in the Sanctuary building (room 306/308), after a delicious Wednesday night meal.

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