

Introduction To The Book Of Romans: Paul, the Author

Rom. 1:1

Introduction

Having completed our study of the life of David, it's my intention, this morning, to begin a new study as we move now to Paul's epistle to the Romans

I began preaching roughly 25 years ago

In July I will have been pastoring for 17 years; 13 ½ with this congregation

And I think that all the years I've been pastoring, I've always wanted to preach through the book of Romans, but I've never been able to bring myself to it

I've never felt that the time was right

I've been on the verge of doing it, and then I've stepped back

Imagine during the frontier days of America, climbing to the top of what is now the Blue Ridge Parkway

And looking out westward over the beautiful, vast landscape below

The valleys, the rolling hills, layer upon layer of mountain ridges and valleys stretching west as far the eye can see

It's very beautiful and you're powerfully drawn to it; you want to launch out and explore it

But it's very a very daunting task, and you're not ready yet, so you climb back down out of the clouds

And content yourself with giving your attention to clearing out a piece of land near by for right now

That's the way I've felt at times when it comes to preaching through the book of Romans

There's something very daunting about it; it's a formidable task

Yet at the same time there's something very exciting about it, and thankfully there are many trailblazers who have already gone before us to map out the terrain

So it's with a sense of fear and trembling that I begin this study

But it's also with a great sense anticipation, enthusiasm and excitement

One reason for that is the tremendous importance of this particular portion of God's Word

There's a reason, I believe, that after the gospel accounts of the life of Christ and then the book of Acts in which we have record of the early days of the church, that the first of the epistles of Paul that we come to is the book of Romans

Why is Romans first?

Well it's not because this was the first epistle that Paul wrote

It's generally agreed that the first letter in the Bible written by Paul is his first letter to the Thessalonians

So why is Romans first in our Bibles?

Well I believe it's because the early church recognized that this particular letter is first in importance

This is the epistle above all others that addresses the foundations, the fundamentals....

The essential foundational doctrines of the gospel and the Christian faith

I think it can also be argued that this one epistle is first, with respect to the impact and influence that it has had in the lives of men and in the history of the church

If I were to ask you, "What one book has had the most powerful influence and impact upon the history of the world and in the lives of men?", what would you answer?

Well, I trust, most of us would say the Bible

But remember the Bible is a book that is made of many different books

Sixty six books, each making its own important contribution to the sum total of God's written revelation

Now out of all the sixty six books of the Bible, which one book has had the most powerful influence and impact upon the history of the world and in the lives of men?

Well I think that, without a doubt, the answer to that question has to be the book of Romans

Let me just give you some examples of what God has done in history through this epistle

Let's begin with a man named Augustine; Augustine of Hippo

It could be argued that between the close of the N.T. Canon and the Protestant Reformation there was no greater, and more influential person in church history than Augustine

One might argue that there's a tie between him and Athanasius

Well some of you may remember his story

He was a brilliant man; a philosopher and a teacher

But he was in bondage to an unclean and immoral life

Having been exposed to the preaching of Ambrose, he was eventually convinced of the truth of the Christian religion

But he was still unconverted, and was still clinging to a life of sin and fornication

There was a great battle going on within him and then came one of the most important days in church history

He was in the garden of a friend's estate in agony of soul, when he overheard the voice of a child singing these words, "Take up and read. Take up and read"

He had never heard a song with words like that before

At that point he rushed over to where a copy of the bible was sitting, opened it up at random and started reading

Well in God's providence the text he turned to and began reading was in the thirteenth chapter of the book of Romans

Rom. 13:13-14, "Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts"

These words became the means of his conversion

Later writing about that day he said, "Instantly, as the sentence ended---by a light, as it were, of security infused into my heart---all the gloom of doubt was vanished away"

Augustine repented, gave himself up in faith to Christ, and became a new man

Then over one thousand years later there was a man named Martin Luther

Luther was not a profligate before his conversion, like Augustine

He was an earnest Roman Catholic monk trying to please God and to make himself right with God

But the more he sought salvation the more elusive it seemed

He developed great gifts as a scholar and became a Doctor of Holy Scripture and professor at Wittenburg University

Still there was no peace in his soul

Instead of loving God, which he knew he should do, he felt that the more he tried to please God, the more he actually hated Him

He was miserable

Part of his responsibility at Wittenburg was to give lectures on the bible

At a certain point he decided to give lectures on the book of Romans

And it was as he studied this epistle that the truth of justification by faith alone began to dawn in his heart

Quoting from Luther's own testimony of what happened

"I began to understand [that] the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which [the] merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written 'He who through faith is righteous shall live'. Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates."

Luther was transformed as he studied this epistle, and this was the beginning of the greatest spiritual revival and social revolution in the history of the world since the coming of Christ

The Protestant Reformation

We could also speak of the influence of the book of Romans in the ministry of John Calvin

In the life of John Bunyan

But let's move to what was perhaps the greatest revival since the reformation...

The Evangelical Awakening in England and America

Do you know about the conversion of John Wesley?

He was a very religious man; he had even gone to Georgia for a time as a missionary, but he had no peace, no assurance of salvation

On May 24th 1738 he attended a meeting in Aldersgate Street in London

It just so happened that someone in the meeting was reading from the Preface and Introduction to Martin Luther's Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans

Wesley sat there listening and as he did, this was his testimony

He said, "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death"

Well his life was changed and the same thing happened to other men, like George Whitfield, and a spiritual force was let loose upon the English speaking world of that time of such power that multitudes of souls were swept into the Kingdom

Well I guess we could go on and on for a long time demonstrating the tremendous influence this epistle has had in the history of the church

Here's one other example many of you may have never heard of

In 1816 there was a Scotsman by the name of Robert Haldane who had gone to Switzerland

He had been used of God in Scotland, together with his brother James

But now around 50 years old he was staying in Switzerland and one day he was just sitting on a seat in the open air

And, as it were, by accident he began to listen in to the conversation of some young men who were seated near him

He realized that they were theology students

But as he listened he also realized that these men were completely ignorant, with reference to the truth and power of the gospel

His heart felt a great burden for these young men

He began to invite them and others to meet with him twice a week in his room to study the scriptures

And what he did was he took them through a study of the epistle to the Romans

He expounded it to them verse by verse and the Holy Spirit blessed it

Those simple bible studies led to the conversion of several men, some who became mighty men of God and great teachers

And it led to a great revival, not only in Switzerland but in France

For example one of them was Merle D'Aubigne, the author of the classic books on the *History of the Reformation*

Another was Fredric Monod, who became the chief founder of the Free Churches in France
Another was Cesar Malan who was the author of four of the hymns in our hymnal, including
Christ of All My Hopes the Ground

And one that we sing often, *Take My Life, and Let It Be*

Well these are some examples of the influence that Romans has had in the history of the church

F. Godet has written that in all probability, “every great spiritual revival in the church will be connected as effect and cause with a deeper understanding of this book”

Even the English poet Samuel Coleridge praised the book of Romans

He was a great literary man, who knew the classics

But he once called Romans, “the profoundest book in existence”

Luther called Romans, “The chief part of the New Testament and the very purest gospel”

He said that “every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, [and] occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of his soul”

Well I hope this has wet your appetite for our study of this epistle

Having given this somewhat lengthy introduction, I’m ready to focus our attention now upon the text of the epistle itself

Today, in the time remaining, all I’m going to do is to expound the first word

The first word is the word, “Paul”

“Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God”

Here we have the author of the book of Romans

And this, in and of itself, is really amazing and astonishing

Here we have this book written to a group of Christians in Rome, the capitol of the great Roman empire

Written to Christians, the majority of which were probably Gentiles

And it’s written to them, of all people, by this man Paul, whose Hebrew name was Saul

One the most amazing things in the history of the world is that this man, Saul of Tarsus, Paul, should have ever written an epistle like this

And yet at the same time there is no man who by the providence and grace of God was better prepared for it

Why do I say that?

Well I want us to consider this man this morning

What kind of man was he?

Let’s consider, first of all,....

I. His Cultural, Educational, And Religious Background

Paul was the product of three cultures

First, he was a Jew of the dispersion

That is he came from among those Jews who had been scattered throughout the Graeco-Roman world

He was from Tarsus, which was the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia

And being from Tarsus He came under both Roman and Greek influence, together with the Jewish influence in his life

That’s why I said that he was the product of three cultures

Here are some of the things that we are told about him in the N.T.

First of all, he was born a Roman citizen according to Acts 22:28

Now this citizenship brought with it many privileges

And we see him making use of those privileges on several occasions in the book of Acts

And he probably used them many other times that we’re not told about

In addition to that, he learned to speak fluently at least two and probably three languages

We know from Acts 21:40; 22:2; and 26:14 that he could speak Hebrew, or Aramaic

And from Acts 21:37 we know that he also spoke Greek

It's very likely that he learned Latin as well

There are hints of this in some of his letters

For example, when writing to the Roman Christians in this epistle he speaks of the fact that he had already evangelized a place he calls Illyricum, in ch.15:19

Well the Greek name of that province was Illyria, but he uses the Latin name Illyricum

Furthermore, the primary spoken language in that province, which he says he had already evangelized, was Latin

He also speaks in this letter of plans to preach the gospel in Spain which at that time was also a territory where Latin was the principal spoken language

So it's probable that Paul could speak Latin as well as Aramaic and Greek

Furthermore, Tarsus, the city he was from, was one of the three main centers of Greek culture in that time

The other two were Athens and Alexandria in Egypt

Tarsus was also renowned as a place of education

And there are, indeed, indications in Paul's writings that he was familiar with Greek philosophy, poetry and history

He knew Greek philosophy well enough to challenge the Greek scholars, and debaters of Corinth referred to in 1 Cor. 1:20

He quotes the Greek poet Menander in 1 Cor. 15:33; Epimenedes in Titus 1:12

And in his sermon before the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers of Athens in Acts 17, he quotes from the poet Cleanthes

So there was much Roman and Greek influence in Paul's upbringing

Yet above all, Paul was clearly a Jew

He describes himself in Pp.3 as, "Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews"

Furthermore, his father, apparently being a man of some means, had sent him at an early age, to study in Jerusalem

He tells us in Acts 22:3 that he studied at the feet of Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of the fathers

Gamaliel was a Pharisee and he was considered one of the great teachers in Israel at that time So Paul was trained in the law by Gamaliel, and his education in Jerusalem probably involved instruction in rhetoric, literature, and philosophy as well

So He was clearly a very educated man, and he had a very *well rounded* education, both secular and religious

He knew the Greek poets and the writings of Greek Philosophers

He had this amazing background in Greek culture and he was a Roman citizen

And then he had also been trained by Gamaliel, the greatest teacher of the Pharisees

And Paul was apparently one of Gamaliel's top students, excelling in his studies

He could refer to himself as "a Pharisee of the Pharisees"

So Paul was a man of many gifts; a brilliant man, a highly gifted and educated man

And this was all very useful later in his ministry

One major focus of the ministry God called him to was defending the Christian faith against Judaism

We'll see him doing that at times in this epistle

And who better qualified to do that, than a man who himself, before his conversion, had been one the most zealous Pharisees of his generation

He knew the other side better than they knew it themselves

And then the other major focus of his ministry was that God called him to be the apostle to the Gentiles

To take the gospel into Greece and throughout the Roman world
Well again, it's obvious that his Roman citizenship and his knowledge of Greek culture and literature was extremely valuable in preparing him for that

And in helping him to understand the people to whom he was preaching
Let me make a few practical comments about this before we go any further

There are Christians who tend to be very skeptical of education, or even of natural gifts and talents, when it comes to the ministry and work of the Holy Spirit
And this has caused a lot of confusion, and in some places it's done a lot of damage to the cause of Christ

Some people seem to have this idea that when it comes to being an effective servant of Christ, all that is necessary is for a man to be converted and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit

That's all you need
Natural gifts and talents have nothing to do with it

And when it comes to education, that's more of hindrance than a help in spiritual work
We don't want men who are naturally talented and well educated, we want men who have the Spirit

And the idea seems to be that the two things are somehow opposed to each other
Well I trust we see that this attitude is wrong

Now it's true that pride in ones natural talents and education *is* a great hindrance and quenches the Spirit

Those things alone are not enough
They're not to be relied on and trusted in and gloried in
It's true that a man must be filled with the Holy Spirit

But, in of themselves, natural talents and a good education are good things
When God saves a man, and determines to use a man, he doesn't cancel out his talents and education

He takes them up and uses them
The Holy Spirit doesn't set them aside.....

He controls them and uses them for the cause of Christ
Remember where did those natural talents and abilities come from?

God gave them
And it's by God's providence that a man has the opportunity to get a good education

Wherever such things are found, ultimately they come from God
They're not bad things that quench the Spirit, they're good things
In fact, if you read through the Bible and read church history, you'll find that often its men of outstanding natural abilities and education that God uses when he does a great work

There are exceptions, but this is often the case
Certainly the man most used of God in the early days of the church was the Apostle Paul

And we've just seen what kind of background he had
What about in the O.T.?

What one man was more greatly used than any other person in the O.T.?
Explain- Moses..etc... Daniel

We see the same thing in church history
Men I've already mentioned like Augustine and Martin Luther; these men were scholars and they had tremendous talents
There's John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards (comment)

These were all men with tremendous natural abilities and gifts, and also men who were full of the Holy Spirit

And the Spirit didn't cancel out those abilities, he took them up and used them in remarkable ways for the cause of Christ

Young people, listen to me, don't cripple your future usefulness by laziness and slackness in your studies at school

Apply yourself with diligence that you might be well prepared, to not just get by.....

But to excel in whatever God calls you to do in your life for his glory

So we've considered Paul's cultural, educational, and religious background

Let's consider now, secondly, something else very relevant to our study of this epistle

II. His Spiritual Condition Before His Conversion To Christ

As already pointed out Paul, before his conversion, was a Pharisee

And you'll remember how Jesus often interacted with the Pharisees in the gospels

He rebuked them for religious externalism and hypocrisy, and for elevating the traditions of men above God's law

He charged them with neglecting the weightier matters of the law, such as justice and mercy and faith, while being extremely nit picky about less important things

He also charged them with self righteousness, describing them as those who trust in themselves that they are righteous

Well Paul, before his conversion was a Pharisee, and he was an extremely zealous Pharisee

In fact his zeal for the traditions of the fathers came to expression in a very violent way

As he says in Pp. 3, "concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal persecuting the church"

Paul rejected the moderate policy toward Christians of his teacher Gamaliel

For him there could be no compromise with these people

He was determined to do all that he could to stamp out this new faith, even to the point of putting Christians to death

We first see him at the stoning of Stephen back in Acts ch.7 consenting to his death

In Acts 8 we are told, "As for Saul he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison"

Paul had almost single handedly torn apart the apostolic church in Jerusalem

The whole church had been scattered by his campaign of terror and repression

And then in ch.9 he heads out to take his terror campaign north to Damascus

And we all know what happened; it was on the road to Damascus that Paul met the resurrected Christ and was converted

So Paul or Saul, his Hebrew name, was a man who hated and persecuted Christians before his conversion

And the scriptures reveal Paul's pre-conversion state, not merely as one of mistakenness, but as one of wickedness

Go back to the stoning of Stephen

Paul was there, remember

He apparently was present in the public debate that Stephen held with the Synagogue of the Freedmen

In fact, this was probably Paul's synagogue for we're told that among those with whom Stephen debated there were Jews from Cilicia

Now what happened in that debate?

Well, Stephen clearly won

The, scripture says that they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke

So what did they do?

Repent and embrace his message?

No, they set up false witnesses to lie about Stephen

They stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes and there was a mock trial

So you had two groups

The people who lost in the debate, that's one group, and the false witnesses that they set up, that's the other group

Well it was in that context that Stephen gave his famous defense before the High Priest and the Jewish leaders

And what a powerful sermon it was

And how did they respond?

Instead of believing and repenting, in their rage they took Stephen out and they stoned him to death

And here is where we are introduced to Paul for the first time

Luke tells us in ch.7:58, "And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul"

And then he tells us a few verses down, "Now Saul was consenting to his death"

Now what does all of this tell us about Paul's involvement with Stephen?

Well according to rule, those who gave witness against a man were the ones who were required to throw the stones

So if the false witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of Paul, Paul was not one of the false witnesses, he was one of those who enticed the false witnesses to speak against Stephen

Which tells us again that he was very likely a participant in the debate with Stephen

He was one of those Stephen got the best of in that debate

Paul, in other words, was a man who was unable to defeat Stephen's arguments in a fair debate

Therefore he threw fairness out the door and resorted to the dirty tactic of trying to discredit his character

And, not only deliberately discrediting his character, he was guilty of enticing false witnesses in a capital case leading to Stephen's death

Paul was a very intelligent man, a gifted man, an influential man, and a highly educated man, it's not hard to imagine how his pride would bristle at being humiliated in a debate with someone like Stephen

He was angry

And he knew the difference between refuting a man and killing him

But not being able to refute Stephen, killing him is the choice he made

In the name of Moses he was venting his hostility toward Moses, rightly understood, by his persecuting of the Christians

Remember Jesus had said to his contemporaries, "If you believed Moses you would also believe in me"

How does Paul himself describe his condition in his pre-conversion days?

He writes in 1 Tim. 1:13, "I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man"

"Insolent" translates a word that speaks of a person who has a superior attitude

One who being lifted up with pride and a sense of superiority heaps insults upon other others or physically mistreats them

Now this is the man who came to be the author of this wonderful epistle

Written to a group of Christians in Rome

Written to Christians the majority of which were probably Gentiles

Gentiles, people who as a Pharisee he would have had nothing do with

He would have thought of them as unclean dogs to be avoided

But this is the same man who is the author of this great epistle

This is why I said earlier that one the most amazing things in the history of the world is that Saul of Tarsus, Paul, could have ever written an epistle like this

What a tremendous testimony to the truth and power of the gospel

Consider some lessons that we can learn from this

First of all, this reminds us that even the most committed opponent of the gospel is not beyond the hope of being converted

Paul was an example of the kind of person that no one would ever expect to be converted

Here he is breathing out threats and murder against Christians

And he won't leave them alone after he's driven them from Jerusalem

Now he's takes his Christian holocaust 150 miles north to Damascus, planning to drag Christians back to Jerusalem for punishment

He was a hater of Christ, a hater of the church, a hater of Christianity

He was determined to spare no cost and to do all within his power to put an end to it

This is the kind of person no one expects to be converted

His opposition is too deep

Too much of his life and self identity is bound up in the way he is, and what he's believed, and stood for all these years

He's taken such a public stand against the gospel

For this man to be converted would be like....

Explain- Madeline Murray O'Hare... Osama Ben Laden...

Things like that just don't happen

Well God wants us to see in the very name that stands at the beginning of this great epistle to the Romans, that things like that can happen

He wants us to see that even the most unlikely people, those people that you would least expect...

Even people like that can be converted and have been converted

And can become eminent servants of Jesus Christ

That's one of the main lessons of the conversion of Paul

I know that's one of the main lessons because the bible tells us that it is

Paul tells us in 1 Tim. 1:13ff that his conversion, among other things, was for your sake and mine, that we might have hope

Listen to what he says, "I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy.."

"This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief"...

Now listen...

"However, *for this reason* I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering as a pattern (or example) to those who are going to believe on him for everlasting life"

In other words, Paul's conversion is intended to be an encouragement to others to believe on Christ for everlasting life

It is intended to show you, to make very vivid to you, the longsuffering of the Lord Jesus

That no one is beyond hope

If you're lost this morning Jesus wants you to know that you can be saved

If Paul can be saved you can be saved, if you'll repent and come to Christ for mercy

And, dear Christians, Paul's conversion should be an encouragement to us to not lose heart when it comes to lost loved ones and friends that we're praying for

It may seem like a waste of time to pray for that person

But it's not a waste time

Christ can save them

Though one minute they may be running headlong into their sin....

The very next minute they may be on their face crying out with Paul, "Lord what wilt thou have me to do"

It can happen that quickly and that unexpectedly, just like it did with Paul, by the sovereign grace and power of our Lord Jesus Christ

Secondly, let us be reminded by what we've seen of the providence of God in preparing his servants for the work he has them to do, even while they are still his enemies

What do I mean?

I've referred to this briefly already

But as we look at Paul's background it's not hard to see that he was the right man to fill the important role that he came to fill in the work of the gospel

And God was preparing him for what he would become, *even when he was still unconverted and was God's enemy*

His cultural background enabled him to confront the challenge that faced the church in the first century

The challenge of bringing the gospel to the major cultures in the Roman empire

It enabled him to see most clearly the issues at stake between Jews and Gentiles being members of the one community of Christ's people

Because he was, what one has called, the 'cosmopolitan, Renaissance man', that he was, he could be comfortable moving about among the various different peoples of the Mediterranean world

The Greeks, the Romans, the pagans, as well as the Jews

Because he was so highly educated, he knew their philosophical questions

He could speak their language, he could address the common man, as well as the Roman governor on his throne

But also with his Jewish background, steeped in the O.T. scriptures, and joined to his keen and well developed mind, he was well prepared to become the great theologian of the church

Listen, even his terrible sins, the depths of cruelty and evil to which he fell, even persecuting the church of God

Even that prepared him to be the man that he became

Paul was to be the great defender the doctrines of grace

And who is better able to understand grace...

To understand that salvation, all the way from eternity past in God's electing plan, to the glory of the world to come, is all of grace

It's all God's free unmerited favor and saving activity on behalf of men and women who do not deserve it

Men and women who could never earn it or merit it in a million years

Men and women who deserve nothing from God but hell

Who could better see that and defend the doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith in Christ alone, than a man like Paul who had been saved out of such a horrible past

You see, in all of these ways, God was preparing Him, even before he was converted, for the work that he had for him to do

Of course, ultimately it was the power of Christ and the work of God's Spirit in his heart that made Paul what he became

But when God saved him he was a man who in many ways was already prepared by God's providence for the role that he would play

This is encouraging

It reminds us that even now, even among those who are currently the enemies of Christ, God may be preparing certain men and women who will accomplish great things for his glory Unknown to them

Right now they're unconverted and Christ and his cause may mean nothing to them

But God is still at work in their lives

Really that's the case with all us who are Christians

Every detail of your upbringing, all the experiences of your life, even before you were saved, were all a part of God's preparation for the particular role in his service and kingdom that he has for you

As Paul himself was to one day write in this very epistle, Rom. 8:28, "God is working all things together for good for those who love and who are the called according to his purpose"

When you belong to Christ you can know that God is working all things together for your good "All things"

Even our past

Even our past before we became Christians

Even our past sins, that we have now repented of

Such is the wonder of God's grace that he takes it all and works it together for our good and for his glory

And this leads me now to one last application

Thirdly, let us be reminded by the first words of this epistle, "Paul a bondservant of Jesus Christ", that what really matters if you're a Christian, is not what you once were, but what you now are

Now that's very simple, and it's so obvious, but how difficult it is to see sometimes when the devil attacks us

When he attacks you with vain regrets and seeks to depress you and discourage you because of what you once were, or what you once did

The many years that you wasted before you became a Christian

The missed opportunities, the awful sins

Or perhaps vain regrets about the past years of your life, even since you became a Christian

Years that were spent in a state of relative immaturity in which you were ignorant of so many important truths

You find yourself dwelling on these things at times, fixated upon them

The devil throws them in your face and you begin to wallow in vain regrets

Perhaps it's some particular sin in your past

You've repented of it, but the devil keeps holding it up before you and you can't get away from it

Something you once said, or you once did, and it keeps haunting you and making you miserable

"How could I ever be so foolish?", and you become paralyzed in your Christian life

Don't you think Paul was sometimes tempted like that?

Perhaps at times the faces of those dear innocent people that he had persecuted would come before his mind

The people he had sent to their death

It's true that Paul did often think about his past

He refers to it several times in his epistles

It grieved him to think about it

He regretted that he had wasted so many years; he deeply regretted all the awful things he had done

But, listen, here's what I want us to see

Paul didn't spend the rest of his life in state of depression because of it

He regretted his past, but he wasn't paralyzed by it

And this is why..

Paul understood what we must understand, that if you're a Christian what really matters is not what you once were, but what you now are

Speaking of himself in 1 Cor. 15, he says, "I'm not worthy to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God"

But he doesn't stop there, he immediately follows by saying...

"But by the grace of God I am what I am"

It doesn't really matter what I was; What's important is what I am

"I am what I am by the grace of God"

One of the glorious things about the Christian gospel is that we don't have to waste our lives being depressed about our past

Because it is the good news of how Christ has taken all my sins and all my failures upon himself and those sins have been punished in Him upon the cross

The past has been blotted out, and what I was doesn't matter anymore

All that matters is what I am

And as a corollary to that, let me say that as Christians we must never look at our past in any other way but that which humbles us and causes us to magnify the grace of God in our lives

We must never look back at our past lives...

We must never look at any failures or sin in our past, whether it was before or after we were converted, if it's been repented of...

In any way except that which leads us to humbly praise and magnify the amazing grace of God that has blotted out that past and has changed us

And that grace we have received should motivate all the more to live the rest of our lives for his glory

Paul could say, "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all"

That's what it did for Paul

And that's what it should do for you