

Chapter 1

The Epistle of Paul to the Romans

Background. Why did Paul write this letter? It is different from any other he wrote. When Paul wrote to the other churches he was addressing pressing problems; this letter mentions no problems. There is a warning against false teachers near the end (16:17f), but the fact that it came in so late in the epistle indicates that it was not a big issue for this church. *Romans* is the one of all Paul's letters that comes nearest to being a theological treatise.

Paul was writing to Christians in the greatest city in the world, the Empire's capital. This church was in a key position for leadership, so it had to be taught in order that it might lead others in the right way. Another possible motive for writing: Paul had always wanted to go to Rome. Like John Wesley, Paul saw the world as his parish.¹ Beyond Rome was Spain, which was producing some of the greatest minds in the world at that time. If only men like Seneca could be won for Christ! Paul needed a base of operations—Rome would serve for that. Paul also wrote to Rome in order to request prayer. He was going to Jerusalem with the money that the Greek believers had collected for the Jewish Christians. This was a dangerous mission.

To what kind of people did Paul write, and how did this church begin? Strangers from Rome

had been present at Jerusalem during Pentecost. It would be hard to believe that none of these returned to Rome. And when a man is a Christian, he looks for the fellowship of other Christians. There you have the beginning of a church, with some Jews and some Gentiles.

What did Paul say to the recipients of this letter? Chapters 1–8 deal with the righteousness of God. Chapters 9–11 deal with the matter of the Jews, God's chosen people. Here Paul turned his heart inside out, revealing the love he bore for his own people, and how much he longed for them to be saved. Chapters 12–15 pertain to practical matters of Christian living. The last chapter includes an introduction for Phoebe (a deaconess), and a long list of personal greetings, the longest such list in all of Paul's letters.

Romans 1. The first seven verses are Paul's greeting to the church. Then verses 8–15 are his introduction to the letter. Paul writes about himself and his concern for the Roman church, how much he wants to see them, and how hard he has tried to come to them. Paul genuinely feels indebted to the people in Rome, and he will not have discharged his debt until he has preached the gospel to them.

In Romans 1:16-17, Paul presents his theme, making the all-important point that a man can never be right with God except by faith in Jesus Christ. This is the message of the gospel—*righteousness obtained through faith*. This is the true method of man's acceptance with God. What does *righteousness* mean? When Luther first understood it, he said, "I felt that I was born again and entered through open doors into paradise!"

I address the Hebrew concept of right and wrong. The Jew always thought of things being settled before a judge. Righteousness is not so much a moral quality as a legal status. God Himself is righteous—absolutely, completely without sin, perfectly holy. And He demands perfect righteousness from His people. But they do not have it, for they have sinned, and they are guilty before a just and holy Judge: God Himself. But, God acts. He acts to get His people right with Himself. He sends His only Son to be made sin for His people. Christ takes the sins of people on Himself, bears them and all their penalty. Then God, in His infinite grace, accepts His people as righteous on account of what Christ has done—*declares* them righteous before the tribunal of heaven. And they *are* righteous, for God reckons the perfect righteousness of Christ as belonging to them.

So that is how you must think of the righteousness of God in this letter—not merely the attribute of God—but His gift to the people who belong to Him.

Paul develops this theme by showing our *need* for righteousness. He shows that all subsections of mankind are under condemnation before God. In chapter 1 Paul shows that this is true of everybody in the Gentile world; in chapter 2 he proves that it is true of everybody in the Jewish world. In Romans 3 Paul summarizes: this is true of every single person who has lived, is living, or ever shall live. All need this righteousness that God gives, or they are lost forever.

How then does Paul develop this? God's wrath is real (1:18). The holy revulsion of His being against anything that contradicts His holiness is real. God's wrath has been revealed in the Holy Scriptures, through His government of the world, and in the conscience of man. *Revealed from heaven* means that God's wrath is coming out of heaven, where God's throne is. From that pure upper world where God is seated—from that stainless sky—the lightning of His wrath falls on all the godless unrighteousness of man. Why on all? Because that revelation of Himself in the world is sufficient to make every man on earth responsible for his sins,

even the millions who have never heard of the true God. They can see God's power and deity in the creation around them and in the events of their own lives. Paul follows with a terrible picture of a world of sinners, always plunging farther and farther down into utter evil. And God Himself is *giving them over* to their sins. That phrase is repeated three times (1:24, 26, 28). God leaves them alone in their sin and its consequences. So much for the natural state of the Gentiles!

Romans 2. But the Jews are in no better condition. They too are under God's judgment; they do the same things. God's judgment will be "according to truth" (marginal rendering of 2:2 in the *New American Standard Bible*). Every fact of life will come under God's judgment, and everything will be judged exactly as it is. God's judgment will be according to justice (2:6-10). In verse 6, Paul quotes from Proverbs 24:12: "[He] will render to every man according to his deeds."

The Scriptures make it plain that there are only two classes of men—those who have been declared righteous by God and those who have not. And God's Word makes it equally plain that for these two classes of people there are two contrasting rewards: eternal life and eternal death accompanied by the indignant wrath of God. God's judgment will be with strict impartiality (2:11-15). There is no respect of persons with God, and the judgment will cover everybody. Paul makes that plain in 2:12. And the judge is Jesus Christ (2:16). Whether a man disobeys the voice of conscience (such as the Gentiles do) or the voice of special revelation (as the Jews do), that disobedience involves guilt and consequent judgment. Circumcision cannot gloss over that fact (2:25-29). Indeed, the greater the privilege, the heavier the responsibility.

Romans 3. But does this mean that the Jew has no advantage whatsoever? No, the Jews had certain privileges; the first mentioned is that they were entrusted with the special revelation (3:2). But such a privilege does not carry immunity from guilt. Both Jews and Greeks are under sin. Paul brings in a damning scriptural indictment against the entire human race (3:10-18). Here, Paul is using a method of Scripture exposition often used by the rabbis of his day. They called it "stringing pearls." They took appropriate quotations from different parts of the Old Testament and put them together to establish whatever point they were making.

I used the word *indictment* advisedly—for it is

a definite legal charge that we are facing here. We are charged with having a disposition whose characteristics are ignorance, indifference, crookedness, and unprofitableness. We are charged with having a tongue whose words are destructive, deceitful, and malignant. We are charged with producing conduct marked by oppression, hurtfulness, and hatred of God. We have no defense against this indictment; every mouth is silenced, all the world is accountable to God (3:19).

Now then, having shown that the need is universal, Paul reveals God's answer to the need. Here is one of the pivots of the letter, the very heart of the Christian faith. How can a man get into a right relationship with God? That is the problem. The old religion, Judaism, had been interpreted as saying that the way to be right with God is by meticulously keeping all the works of the law. But that means there is no possibility of anyone ever having salvation, for no one ever has kept or ever will keep every commandment of the law.

There must be some other way, or we are without hope. Paul says, "Yes!" (3:21-26). God says, *I will give you perfect righteousness Myself. It will be yours by My free gift. Not only will I wipe out your sins, but I will credit to your account the perfect life of Jesus Christ.* Romans 3:21-22: "But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ, for all those who believe." How can a man be right with God? This was Job's question, and thousands are asking the same question today. Romans 3:22-25: "There is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood."

We must now grasp the meaning of the terms *justification*, *redemption*, and *propitiation*. Simply, *justification* is a declaration of righteousness. *Redemption* is a ransom price paid.

Propitiation is satisfaction for an angry God. Under the Jewish system, when a man broke the law he brought a sacrifice to God. He hoped that through the sacrifice God would be gracious to him—the sacrifice would avert God's wrath. But this never really worked.² All the paraphernalia of earthly sacrifice had never put matters right. But Paul says that the supreme sacrifice (which the others typified) has been offered—Jesus Christ has offered Himself as a sacrifice for us. This is the one sacrifice to God which really and truly takes away sin. *Propitiation* is at the center of the gospel and it

is the pivot of this letter. The anger of God is quenched and His justice is eternally satisfied.

We gain a part in this through faith. Paul deals with the concept of faith later, though he mentions it here. Before leaving this point Paul says that if the way to God is by faith alone, then all boasting in human achievement is gone (3:27). Jews have nothing to crow about since this righteousness that comes through faith is equally open to Gentiles. William Cooper said,

"I flung myself into a chair near the window, and seeing a Bible there, ventured once more to apply it for comfort and instruction. The first verse I saw was the 25th of the 3rd of *Romans*: 'Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood.' Immediately I received strength to believe it. I saw the sufficiency of the atonement He had made, my pardon sealed in His blood, and all the fullness and completeness of His justification. Unless the Almighty Arm had been under me, I think I should have died with gratitude and joy."

Romans 4. Paul cites the case of Abraham, squelching a possible Jewish objection that Abraham's justification was really by works. No, Paul says, *the righteousness reckoned to Abraham was on the basis of faith.* Nor could anyone claim that Abraham's salvation came through circumcision, for the promise which he believed (that he was heir to the world) was given *before* he was circumcised; circumcision did not come until 14 years later. Circumcision was not the gateway to Abraham's right relationship with God. It was only the sign and seal that he had already entered that right relationship through faith.

The Puritans wisely spoke of three aspects of faith: *self-renunciation*, *reliance on God*, and *appropriation*. As to *self-renunciation*, a man acknowledges in faith that he cannot trust himself or anything he does to win acceptance with God. Faith involves *reliance on God*; man believes God's promise and trusts Him, depends on Him, and leaves his soul in his Savior's hands. Faith must also be *appropriated*; man takes to himself what God has promised, appropriating it as his own, and enjoys it. This Abraham did, and because of it he was declared righteous. Faith is God's gift; we are justified by faith.

Romans 5. Paul here brings in the *blessings* that flow from justification by faith. The first blessing is *peace with God*. H. G. Wells, an unbeliever, told of a man of affairs whose mind was so tensed

and strained that he was in serious danger of complete mental breakdown. His doctor told him that the only thing that could save him was to find the peace that only fellowship with God can give. The wearied man replied, "What? To think of that up there, having fellowship with me! I would as soon think of cooling my throat with the Milky Way or shaking hands with the stars!" This is how many people think, but we are at peace with God.

This peace leads to *exultation*, the word used in the New American Standard Bible. "We exult in hope of the glory of God" (5:2). "We also exult in our tribulations" (5:3). "We also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation" (5:11). How is Paul able to speak of *exultation*? Think of all the tribulation he had suffered, and he knew that more was coming. Still, he says, *exult!* Tribulation brings about perseverance, and perseverance brings proven character, which brings hope that never disappoints us (5:3-5). The Spirit dwelling in our hearts makes us aware of the greatness of God's love to us (5:5). Paul proceeds to show that the demonstration of God's love for us is found in the cross (5:8). In the latter part of chapter 5, Paul's language grows somewhat involved. The point he makes by this comparison between Adam and Christ is that the universality of sin through Adam is overcome by the abundance of grace through Christ. This passage is the key to the concept of federal theology.

Romans 6. Paul shifts his thinking. Now he is applying this principle of imputed righteousness to individual life. How does justification affect conduct? Paul introduces an argument that somebody would be likely to make: *If the abundance of grace overcomes sin, why not keep on sinning?* (6:1) Away with that thought! Holy living (living for Christ) is bound to follow our being declared right with God. Bound to follow, because if a man is a believer, he is bound to hate sin, bound to want to get away from it, bound to want to do only what will glorify his Savior. We live for Christ because we are identified with Christ, Paul says. As Jesus died to sin, so do we. As Jesus was raised to life, so are we.

Yes, we are dead to the guilt of sin. But it is most evident that we are not dead to the influence of sin. Nevertheless, we died to sin when we put our faith in Christ. We not only died, we were buried through baptism. We were as effectively shut out from Satan's kingdom as those who are in the grave are shut out from the world. And in all of this we are identified with Christ. But He rose again!

Because we are identified with Him in His resurrection, we can walk with Him in newness of life. Christ has won for us a new wonderful life-power. Sin can no longer be master over us (6:14); this is borne out by experience. Those who have been freed from the slavery of sin have in fact become God's slaves, committing themselves to His service (6:15-23). Paul commands us to offer ourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness (6:19).

Romans 7. Paul uses the illustration of marriage to show that we are no longer bound to the law of God as a means of salvation (7:1-6). What do we mean by *the law*? The law is the rule of action which God has prescribed for mankind. It was written on Adam's heart, defaced by sin, and yet survived the Fall. The law was revealed at Sinai, summarized in the Ten Commandments. Paul uses the figure of marriage; only death can break a marriage bond. We were married to the law. Christ sent His Holy Spirit into our hearts; by His Spirit's working we became Christians. At the very moment when we first believed, we died to the law; our marriage to the law was broken. Note this: when we became Christians, not only did we die to the law, but new life was poured into us. Now we have entered into the new marriage—our Bridegroom is Christ Himself. Him we love and serve.

But here arises a critical question: What really is the law's function? What good does it do? Paul strips his own soul bare to tell us what the law did for him before his conversion (7:7-13). From his testimony we learn that the function of the law is to define sin, to reveal it to the human heart, to convince people of sin's power, and to show them that they are under condemnation.

Then Paul tells us more about the function of the law by showing what happened after his conversion. Life is a continual battle. The law is spiritual, of God, holy, just, and good. The law shows us God's will. But we are *not* spiritual; we are of flesh, sold under sin, *in bondage to sin*—this is a strong phrase (7:14). Such a one is in the condition of a slave. A slave does not always act according to his inclination. His will may be one way, but his master directs another way, and he is obliged to obey his master. So within the believer there is often going to be a struggle, because he does not wish to do the master's will. Charles Hodge said, "As the believer's life is a constant conflict, those who do not struggle against sin and endeavor to subdue it are not true Christians." In 7:24 Paul gives us a graphic picture of the abhorrent nature of abiding sin—a dead body is strapped to the back

of a living man until it has rotted (this was an actual Roman torture). But we have the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

Romans 8. Paul goes on to describe this life of victory. What do you think of this statement?: *If the Holy Scriptures were a ring, and the letter to the Romans its precious stone, chapter 8 would be the sparkling point of the jewel.* There is something to that, for this chapter shows us how the problems of Christian living are solved, and it lists privilege after privilege that is meant to be enjoyed. There is one central thought that runs right through the chapter and binds it together: the Christian's complete and utter *safety*. The Christian is in Christ's hand, and no one and nothing can snatch him out of Christ's hand.

Paul provides eight reasons why the Christian is safe forever:

- because he is free from all condemnation (8:1-4).
- because he is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, who has regenerated him, is sanctifying him, and will resurrect him in the last day (8:5-13).
- because he has been adopted into God's family (8:14-17).
- because God encourages and helps him in the different troubles that come in life (8:18-25).³
- because the Holy Spirit prays for him—how He helps our weakness in prayer (8:26-27)!
- because God controls all things for His good (8:28).
- because God plans for him, and nothing can change God's plans (8:29-34).
- because God loves him, and nothing can separate him from God's love (8:35-39).

Romans 9. Paul has been reflecting on the blessedness of the Christian's position; that moves him to think of the terrible plight in which his own Jewish people are situated. They have so many privileges, but have failed to prize them or use them. Why is this? Is it because God's Word has failed? By no means! Paul launches into the doctrine of election; and what a powerful exposition he gives! There is no injustice in election, for God is sovereign. It is God who decrees what justice is. Men must recognize the fundamental difference between themselves and the Creator. Paul uses the humbling picture of the potter and the clay. God is not responsible for the rejection of the Jews; the fault lies at their own door (9:30-31).

Romans 10. The Jews sought righteousness through self-effort, not by faith. By seeking to go

after righteousness on their own, they resisted the righteousness of God. All that passionate enthusiasm of theirs was misplaced. No amount of self-effort can ever meet the need. But look! Romans 10:4: "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." Christ is the goal to which the law is to bring us. Through faith in Jesus we obtain righteousness. Then Paul goes on to explain how his Jewish people or anyone might come to a knowledge of the truth, showing that what he has just written is true from the Old Testament Scriptures.

Romans 11. This chapter shows that God's rejection of the Jewish people has never been total; there has always been a remnant chosen and preserved by God's grace (11:5). In any case, the rejection of Israel has provided the opportunity for the ingathering of the Gentiles (11:11). Paul uses the figure of the olive tree and the foreign branch which has been successfully grafted into it (11:17ff). The glorious time is coming when not only the fullness of the Gentiles will be brought in, but the fullness of Israel as well (11:25-32). That is what compels Paul to cry, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" (Romans 11:33)

Romans 12-16. Such deep doctrine! But the gospel is practical too. These chapters are as practical as can be. Paul shows the implications for the Christian who is living a dedicated life in his own personal existence and in the church (Rom. 12). Paul shows our civic and social duties in chapter 13. Paul deals with a special problem in Romans 14:1-15:3. What foods are permissible for a Christian? Are foods that have been offered to idols permissible or not? That was the burning question then, and the principle is valid now. Our fellow believers have scruples—we are not to condemn them for that. Their scruples may be invalid and show the weakness of their faith, but we are to act towards them in love. The strong are to bear with the failings of the weak. Our own personal considerations are secondary to the spiritual welfare of the people of God.

As the epistle ends, Paul gives an explanation of the motives that led him to write, he gives an outline of his plans, he sends his greetings, and he concludes with a magnificent doxology.⁴

Recommended Reading:

G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 437-456.

Steele and Thomas, *Romans: An Interpretive Outline*, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company: Philadelphia, 1963.

Review and Extend:

Use the Steele and Thomas text to affix in your mind a working outline of Romans. Summarize in five paragraphs what Romans teaches about: sin, salvation, sanctification, sovereignty, and service.

End Notes

¹ From *John Wesley's Journal* (edited by N. Curnock), January 24, 1738.

² Psalm 51:16: "For Thou dost not delight in sacrifice, Thou art not pleased with burnt offering."

Micah 6:6-7: "With what shall I come to the Lord? Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings? Does the Lord take delight in thousands of rams? Shall I present my first-born for my rebellious acts?"

³ Paul here uses a graphic figure to bring out the reality of suffering for us. More than a figure, Paul addresses actual fact. Romans 8:22 speaks of the whole creation groaning and suffering pains

like those experienced in childbirth. Natural disasters, pests, plagues—why does creation suffer these maladies? They are results of sin. Genesis 3:17: "Cursed is the ground for thy sake." But, the whole creation is eagerly waiting for something. Paul gives the idea of a man scanning the horizon with his head thrust forward, eagerly searching the far distance for the first sign of dawn, waiting for the wonderful day when Christ will come again in His glory, and God's adopted sons will be raised in glory and shown to the assembled universe. Then creation will be delivered from the curse. So the creation is to share in the fruit of Christ's redemption.

⁴ Romans 16:25-27: "Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading them to obedience of faith; to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen."