

Paul's Letter to the Romans

Introduction and Romans 1-3

Introduction

The Letter to the Romans has been one of the most influential books in the New Testament. Many of the greatest church leaders in the history of the Christian church were converted or deeply influenced by the letter. People such as, St. Augustine, Martin Luther, John Wesley all trace their initial conversion and spiritual awakening to verses from the letter to the Romans.

Rightly so, the letter is Paul's most systematic and dynamic presentation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Author

The letter begins with the identification of the author as the Apostle Paul vs. 1: "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God..." In this brief statement we find several self-descriptions by the author. We know his name. He considered himself a "servant of Christ." Servant was a typical self-referential title used by the prophets and apostles. The title "apostle" is related in that it conveys the action of being authorized and sent by Christ with a particular message. Paul clarifies that message to be the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Gospel literally means "good news".

Purpose of the Letter

Paul's aim in writing the letter is to set forth a clear and well developed presentation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and its implications for the church and the world. He clearly identifies this purpose in his opening statements:

"Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, 2 which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, 3 concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh 4 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, 5 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, 6 including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,... Romans 1:1-6

Paul is certainly writing to a particular audience and is specifically addressing the church in Rome. However, his exposition is more positive than negative. It does not appear that Paul is addressing any particular problem as he does in some of his other letters. Rather, he is providing a broad theological foundation for the church which will be readily accessible with little need for adjustments for context in applications to other audiences besides the church in Rome. His main theme is the theological and personal application of the incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. Paul clearly understands this to be the fulfillment of everything the Jewish Scriptures hoped for in the Messiah and

the Messianic age. He also sees the message of the Gospel as having wide implications not just for the Jewish people but “among all the nations” including the church in Rome.

Original Audience: The Church in Rome

“To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints...” The Roman church had even by this point become something of a missionary outpost and hub. As the capital city of the Roman Empire, the church had a global reach for the mission of the Gospel. Paul expressed gratitude to the church for their strong witness saying, “I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.”

It appears from the letter that Paul had not personally visited the church in Rome, though he deeply wanted to do so. (v. 13) The letter is a way of laying the groundwork for that future preaching-teaching visit, and may have ultimately served to be a surrogate for a more personal instruction. The reason for Paul’s delay is revealed in Romans 15:22-33 where he describes his journey to Jerusalem to deliver a gift to the impoverished saints in Jerusalem

It is long appreciated that Paul’s delay in visiting Rome actually became the occasion for writing this letter which has had such a tremendous impact for the Gospel. Had he actually gone to Rome as he indicated, letter to the Romans would not have been written. That is why one commentator calls Paul’s Jerusalem gift, “The Gift that Changed the World”. Sometimes God prevents us from doing what we want so that he can accomplish an even greater purpose.

Clearly Paul knew many of the individuals serving in ministry in Rome. His long list of greetings and encouragements in chapter 16 lists over 30 individuals with people in Rome or sending greetings to Rome. While this letter is a deep theological work, it is also deeply personal. For this reason, it has proved to be life changing in its application for everyone who has undertaken to study it with any faith in Jesus and openness to the Spirit of God.

Structure of Romans

Topic	Passage
Introduction to the Revelation of the Gospel	1:1 - 1:17
The Revelation of the Justice of God	1:18 - 3:20
The Revelation of the Grace of God	3:21 - 8:39
The Revelation of the Plan of God	9:1 - 11:36
The Revelation of the Will of God	12:1 - 15:13
Concluding Greetings and Benedictions	15:14 - 16:27

Introduction to the Revelation of the Gospel (1:1 - 1:17)

In Paul's Introduction we see something of a thesis statement for the book of Romans where he writes:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith." --Romans 1:16-17

One of the most important things to know is that the Gospel (or Good News) is a **revelation**. That means that the message of the Gospel is not something that Paul is making up, rather it is a message that God is giving to the people of the world through the apostle. Over the course of his letter, Paul will systematically work through the major themes of this thesis statement.

First, he will establish the universal human need for salvation from the just judgment of a Holy, Holy, Holy God. Every person on this planet desperately needs the message of salvation held out in the Gospel. This is why Paul is not ashamed to bring this message. This will be covered in the first 3 chapters.

Second Paul will expand on how God has revealed his salvation in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Paul calls this salvation "righteousness" or "justification", and it is a gift offered to all humanity. He will explain that the way a person receives this righteousness is by responding in what he calls "the obedience of faith" in Jesus. In chapters 3-8, Paul will explain how this righteousness works and is appropriated in our lives through belief, or faith.

In chapters 9-11, Paul explains the unfolding plan of a sovereign God who begins with the offer of the Gospel to and through the Jewish people and then to the rest of the world. He wrestles with the implications of God's sovereignty and human responsibility to carry out the plan of salvation, "to the Jew first and also to the Greek".

Finally, Paul will expand on those who have believed in the Gospel will "live by faith". Quoting the Prophet Habakkuk 2:4: "The righteous will live by faith." Not only do the "righteous" receive eternal life because of faith, but the righteous will manifest their faith tangibly in the character and actions of their lives. Chapters 12-15, discuss the implications of the Gospel through the discernment of God's will and the applications of his will in our individual lives and among the believing community of the people of God.

The Revelation of the Justice of God (1:18-3:20)

In Romans 1:18 – 3:20, Paul makes a systematic case that all people are alike in that they are under the judgment of God because of sin and rebellion. Paul begins his discussion of our need for salvation, discussing the wrath of God revealed against the rebellion of the pagan gentile societies in general (1:18-32). He then progresses to demonstrate the fallacy of self-justification by addressing the self-righteous moralist (2:1-16). Lastly he addresses those who would exempt themselves from the judgment of God due to their Jewish status as heirs of God's law (2:17-38). He concludes with a compilation of

stinging quotes from the Hebrew Scriptures revealing the universality of human sin and rebellion in all people. So that, “the whole world may be held accountable before God.”(3:19)

The Wrath of God (1:18-32)

Paul, begins his argument with a rather jarring statement:

“The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.” – Romans 1:18

The fundamental problem which necessitates the Gospel is that all human kind is in dire danger of God’s righteous judgment. Before Paul tells the good news, he wakes us up to the bad news. Humanity is at deep root level rebellious to God and his self revealed nature. They have willfully held down and rejecting the truth about God and failed to give him the worship and glory that he is properly due.

The consequences of this rebellion have been immense. God has “given them over” to the depravities of their minds, hearts and desires. Many of the things that we so often label as “sins” are really the fruit and consequences of willful rebellion against the worship of God.

The Critical Moralist (2:1-16)

Paul anticipates that some will seek to exempt themselves from the blanket condemnation by the moralist who would stand in judgment over those who commit the sins listed in Chapter 1. Paul reveals that any moralistic judgment ultimately is self condemning because all people have sinned. As soon as the moralist objects, Paul would point to their hypocrisy. The moralist’s commitment to law and conscience only results in condemnation, because no one can keep the laws of God perfectly. And God’s justice for those who break his law is perfect in its impartiality and exactitude. He even will judge the “secrets of men”(v.16). The moralist serves to highlight condemnation under the law.

The Self-Righteous Jew (3:1-9)

Paul offers eight self confident statements of Jewish self righteousness:

But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God¹⁸ and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law;¹⁹ and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness,²⁰ an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—Romans 2:17-20

Then he turns the tables on the self-confidence by again highlighting the Jewish hypocrisy when it comes to keeping the law: “you who preach against stealing, do you steal?” (2:21). The Jewish faith reveals the oracles of God and the standards of God. But in revealing those righteous standards they also demonstrate human sinfulness by way of contrast. The light of God flows from the words of the Jewish people, yet their own lives are characterized by just as much darkness as the rest of humanity. (3:5-8).

ALL have sinned! (3:10-20)

Paul's dramatic conclusion is that every single person, including himself (3:9), has sinned and is alike in deserving wrath and condemnation. With a barrage of quotes from the Old Testament Psalms and Prophetic writings, he summarizes this section:

*"None is righteous, no, not one;
no one understands;
no one seeks for God.
All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one."
"Their throat is an open grave;
they use their tongues to deceive."
"The venom of asps is under their lips."
"Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness."
"Their feet are swift to shed blood;
in their paths are ruin and misery,
and the way of peace they have not known."
"There is no fear of God before their eyes." –Romans 3:10-18*

If the book of Romans were to end there, this would be a gloomy book indeed! However, Paul has now laid the groundwork for the great Gospel of God in Jesus Christ. Our universal sin and the revelation of God's wrath and judgment against human sin will mean that we all have a universal need for salvation.

The laws of God and the consciences of men stop every mouth from self-justification and holds the entire world "accountable to God" (3:19) The law condemns us—it cannot save us.

The good news of a revealed solution to that need will be given in the rest of the book of Romans. Paul will describe the grace offered to all people through faith in the person and works of Jesus Christ.

Next Week: Romans 3:20-8:39