

The Epistle of Paul to the Church at Rome

October 21, 2003

Introductory Remarks

Romans appears first among the epistles of the NT, not because it was written first, but because it is the foundational epistle of the NT. It contains the most complete exposition of the doctrine of salvation that is to be found anywhere in all of Scripture. Therefore, it is an excellent place to start the study of all of the NT epistles.

In all there are twenty-one epistles in the NT, and they are arranged according to their writers. First we have the epistles of Paul, thirteen, or fourteen, if we include the Epistle to the Hebrews. And Paul's epistles are arranged as follows:

- 1) His epistles to churches: Romans through 2 Thessalonians (9).
- 2) His epistles to individuals: 1 Timothy through Philemon (4).
- 3) His epistle to the Hebrews (1), although not everyone agrees that Paul wrote Hebrews.

Following Paul's epistles we have:

- 1) The epistle of James (1).
- 2) The epistles of Peter (2).
- 3) The epistles of John (3).
- 4) The epistle of Jude (1).

These, with Paul's epistles, makes a total of twenty-one.

As far as Paul's epistles are concerned, A. T. Robertson, a NT Greek scholar, believed that Paul's epistles were written in this order:

- 1) 1 and 2 Thessalonians.
- 2) 1 and 2 Corinthians.
- 3) Galatians.
- 4) Romans.

Then the Prison Epistles:

- 5) Philippians.
- 6) Philemon.
- 7) Colossians.
- 8) Ephesians.

Followed by Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus:

- 9) 1 Timothy.
- 10) Titus.
- 11) 2 Timothy.

If Paul wrote Hebrews it must have been one of his last epistles, but it is impossible to say when.

Since we are studying Colossians in our morning service, I would call your attention to the connection between Galatians and Romans, and Colossians and Ephesians. Galatians deals with the defense of the Gospel; Romans gives us the exposition of the Gospel. Colossians deals with the defense of the doctrine of Christ and the Church, while Ephesians gives us the larger exposition, especially of the Church.

It is absolutely necessary to know when and where this epistle was written, but it is thought that it was written in the late 50's, and from Corinth (at least in Greece) during the three months that Paul was there according to Acts 20:2-3.

What is more important, is, why did Paul write this epistle to the Romans? We can answer that question by reading the epistle.

First, can you calculate the loss it would be if we did not have this epistle to the Romans with its detailed description of the Gospel? There is no other book in all of the Bible like it. It was absolutely necessary that someone go through the Old Testament gathering up the truths related to the Gospel, and then add to that great body of truth what the Holy Spirit gave to Paul to draw upon the death, the resurrection, and present ministry of Christ in heaven to give us the completed account of the Gospel.

Secondly, Paul was the Apostle to the Gentiles. See Gal. 2:6-9; Acts 9:15. Probably Rome held the greatest concentration of Gentiles in all of the Empire. Therefore, it is not surprising to learn that although he had never been to Rome, he had tried to go many times, but had been providentially hindered from going because of the need to preach the Gospel in other places. So for Paul his ministry would not have been complete without contacting the people of Rome in some way, if not by going there himself, than by a letter such as he was directed by the Holy Spirit to write.

We don't know how the Gospel first went to Rome, nor do we know who was instrumental in getting the church established in that great city. We do know that on the day of Pentecost which is recorded for us in Acts 2, there were people from Rome present. See Acts 2:10. It is reasonable to expect that there were people from Rome, Jews, who were saved among the three thousand who were drawn to Christ on that day, and that they took the Gospel back to Rome with them. Also there was an incredible amount of travel to and from Rome in those days by both Jews and Gentiles, and so it is possible that many were used of God to see that a church was established there for the edification of the saints and for the evangelization of other people in Rome who needed the Savior.

It is very apparent that by the grace of God a tremendous change was made in the heart of Saul of Tarsus when the Lord saved him at some point on his way to Damascus in Acts 9. Saul had been a very devout Jew. He hated Christians, and he hated their Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. And yet by the transforming power of the Gospel he spent the rest of his life preaching primarily (but not exclusively) to Gentiles the glorious Gospel of the grace of God. He even took a Gentile name, Paul. And this leads me to a third reason for the writing of this epistle to the Romans.

The third reason for writing to the believers at Rome was because of the trouble that was present in the early church between Jews and Gentiles (or Greeks). Cf. Rom. 1:16; 2:10; 3:1, 9 (following chapter 2 where Paul was addressing the Jews). See also Rom. 3:29-31; 4:16-17. And then we have chapters 9 through 11 where Paul addressed the problem more in detail. He showed that there is a future for Israel, but also issued a warning to Gentiles.

So this was an issue of such great importance that it was essential that believers hear from the apostle to the uncircumcision in order to have a true understanding of the Gospel. The Gospel is mentioned four times in Paul's introduction to this epistle. See 1:1, 9, 15, and 16. Salvation is not just for the Jew, but also for the Gentile. And it is the same Gospel that saves both, not one Gospel for the Jew, and another for the Gentile.

A fourth reason Paul had for writing this epistle, was to show the progressive nature of salvation. It is "from faith to faith." And his quotation from Hab. 2:4 was given to indicate that the Christian life begins by faith, and continues by faith. Justification comes first, followed by sanctification, which ultimately leads to glorification. So the believer begins by faith, continues by faith, and will ultimately be glorified "by faith."

This means that the life of a child of God is a life of trusting God. It begins by faith, and continues by faith until we are ultimately "with the Lord."

The key verses: Rom. 1:16-17.

The outline:

- I. Presentation (Rom. 1:1-17).
- II. Condemnation (Rom. 1:18-3:20).
- III. Justification (Rom. 3:21-4:25).
- IV. Sanctification (Rom. 5:1-8:17).
- V. Glorification (Rom. 8:18-38).
- VI. Dispensation* (Rom. 9:1-11:36).
- VII. Exhortation (Rom. 12:1-15:33).
- VIII. Salutation (Rom. 16:1-27).

* In theology Dispensation is “the ordering of events under divine authority” (*Webster’s New World Dictionary*, p. 217). It also has been defined as “the divine ordering of worldly affairs” (*The American Heritage Dictionary*, p. 407). In the NT the word “dispensation” (οἰκονομία) is not a period of time, as it is commonly defined, but “a mode of dealing, an arrangement or administration of affairs” (Vine, I, p. 321). And so it has reference to the plans and purposes of God as He sovereignly works out His will upon the earth. We get our English word *economy* from the Greek word οἰκονομία which speaks of the management of the resources of a country. And, as it involves men, it is a stewardship. That is true of political leaders in government, and it is true of the servants of the Lord in the church. We do not set up our own programs and plans, but taking the Word to see what God’s will is, we devote ourselves to carrying out our divinely ordered mission.

Encourage the reading and re-reading of Romans.

I hope to get through all of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans this school year. To do this I am going to have to keep moving right along. But I am not going to neglect any part of the epistle, and I hope that you will feel free to ask me about anything in our studies that is not clear to you. Many times in the past the reading and study of the book of Romans has been blessed by God in outstanding ways, and I trust that will be our experience as we explore its truth in the coming days. Pray for me as I prepare the lessons, and teach. But pray that your own heart will be opened by the Holy Spirit to the truth of Romans. And pray that others will join us in our fellowship together.

And now we come to the first point in our outline:

I. PRESENTATION (Rom. 1:1-17).

I am using the word “presentation” as a synonym for an introduction. The Apostle Paul was presenting himself and his authority in writing this epistle. He presented his message to his readers. He addressed the original recipients of this letter. He gave them his greeting. He spoke of his prayer for them. And then with the three I am’s he expressed his dedication to the work that the Lord had called him to do. With the third “I am” he restated the basic truths of the message he would unfold for them from this point on to the end of this epistle.

A. “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ” (Rom. 1:1a).

1:1a The first thing that he did, which was customary for that time, was to identify himself as the writer. It is too bad that we haven’t carried on the same practice because the first thing we do when we open a letter if we don’t know the handwriting or the writer’s name was not on the envelope, is to look at the end of the letter to see who has written to us. Paul identified himself in two ways: first, as “a servant of Jesus Christ,” and second, as one who was “called to be an apostle.” Let me deal with the first, and then we will come to the second.

It is important to see that Paul considered himself “a servant of Jesus Christ” first, and then an apostle. Sometimes when I may be meeting a person for the first time, and they ask me if I am a pastor, I tell them, “yes,” but I have gone on to say because of the circumstances that “I am a Christian first.” Paul’s right to be an apostle rested first on the fact that he was saved, that he knew the Lord, that he was a servant of the Lord. Paul was a bondservant of Jesus Christ. He had been bought with a price, the blood of Christ. Jesus Christ was his Master, his Lord. This answers the question that many have debated about recently as to whether the Lord can be your Savior, but not you Lord (until possibly some later date). But it is easy to claim to be a servant of Jesus Christ without not much evidence in our lives as to what that means. As a servant of Jesus Christ, Paul knew that he had a divine obligation to do the Lord’s will. He obviously was thankful that he was an apostle, but he knew that being the Lord’s servant came first. It is good to spend some time thinking about these first six words of the epistle.

But Paul had a very important mission ahead of him as he began to write this letter. And so he had to deal with the question of his authority. And he combined with that his message and his mission.

B. Paul’s authority, his message, and his mission (Rom. 1:1b-5).

1:1b I mentioned last time that Paul wrote thirteen epistles, or letters, in the NT – fourteen if we could the book of Hebrews. In Gal., Eph., 1 Tim., 2 Tim., and Titus he mention only himself as the writer. Godet says that this is especially when he is dealing with special doctrines or situations where the people or individuals need to recognize the authority, the God-given authority, with which he was writing. This position was only given to thirteen men, one of whom betrayed our Lord, and was succeeded by Matthias. Paul, in 1 Cor. 15, did not consider himself to be one of the twelve. There were no successors to the original apostles.

William Newell, in his commentary on Romans, remarked, “Throughout church history, to depart from Paul has been heresy. To receive Paul’s gospel and hold it fast, is salvation” (p. 2).

Paul did not volunteer to be an apostle. He was not appointed by the other apostles, nor by the earth church. He was “called” to his apostleship by our Lord Himself. The word “apostle” comes to us from the Greek verb ἀποστέλλω which speaks of being *sent forth from one to someone else*. He is a man with a mission, not a mission of his own making, but a mission given to him by God. And Paul went on to say that he was “separated unto the Gospel of God.” He was especially set apart for the spread of the Gospel, *good news from God about the salvation of sinners*. And we soon learn in this introduction to the epistle what the Gospel is. In fact, Paul began right away to make sure that his readers knew what he was talking about.

1:2 The Gospel did not originate as a revelation given to the Apostle Paul, but it was “promised” by God, and by Him revealed to OT prophets in Old Testament times and recorded “in the holy Scriptures,” the writings of the OT. So this means that the salvation that was predicted in Old Testament times is the same salvation that Paul was to preach. The big difference is that through Paul God has given us the complete account of salvation which none of the OT prophets could have given because Christ has not yet come.

1:3 Here Paul told us Who is the main subject of the Gospel. It has to do with the Son of God, Jesus Christ, our Lord, “Who was made (became) of the seed of David according to the flesh.” Note that the birth of Christ was not His beginning. He had no beginning. It was when He became a Man a true perfect human being, while still being the Son of God. And this is a very important point. If He was anything less than absolute Deity in His humanity, He could not have been our Savior.

But verse 3 does not give us all about Christ that we need to know. Paul was giving us his message here, and

he carried it over to our Lord's resurrection where after His life on earth, and after His death on the Cross, He was "declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead." Among the many truths declared and supported by the resurrection of Christ, was His perfect holiness. "The spirit of holiness" is a strange expression. Most expositors do not believe that it refers to the Holy Spirit, but that it is a declaration of *the holiness of Christ*. Although our Lord was "made sin for us," as 2 Cor. 5:21 declares, yet "He put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (Heb. 9:26). His resurrection testified to the fact that the sins of those for whom He died were *gone!* They were not on us, nor were they on Him. Our sins were "purged" (Heb. 1:3).

It should be noted in connection with the statement, "the spirit of holiness," that in 1 Cor. 15:45 our Lord, as "the last Adam" is called "a quickening spirit."

1:5 It was directly through the resurrected Christ that Paul received "grace and apostleship." "Grace" undoubtedly here has a twofold meaning. It refers to the fact, as we have seen in verse 1, that Paul received the grace of God in salvation prior to his call to be an apostle, but, as Bishop Moule brought out, he received and continued to receive enabling grace for his apostleship. Paul was in no way claiming to be worthy of such a calling, but he was acknowledging his continuing dependence upon the Lord for the accomplishing of God's purpose and Christ's purpose (one and the same purpose) in calling him to be an apostle.

What was the purpose?

"For obedience to the faith among all nations, for His Name," *i.e.*, the Name and glory of Christ. Paul's calling as an apostle was to persuade people, all people, Jews, but especially Gentiles, to obey the Gospel, which means to believe the Gospel.

Moule pointed out that a few years before this you would not have heard or seen these words from the former Saul of Tarsus. As I have mentioned, he had hated Jesus Christ. He hated the Gospel of "the way." He hated Gentiles. And he hated Christians. But now he loved Christ. He had devoted his life to the preaching of the Gospel. He loved Christians, and he was fervently pursuing Gentiles that they might believe the Gospel and be saved. What an amazing difference had taken place in this man's heart, a difference which can only be explained by the grace of God in his own heart!

"For His Name" means that Paul even loved the very Name of the Lord Jesus Christ. And the whole objective of his ministry was to bring glory and honor and praise to that precious Name.

1:6 Paul was a called apostle, and every child of God can be identified as "the called of Jesus Christ." None of us came on our own accord. We were called, or we never would have come. Paul used that word again in the next verse (7). And we have it three times in Rom. 8:28, 30 (2x). Jesus Christ has called us, and He has called us to Himself.

Be sure to note in these words of the Apostle Paul that he had been called to a work which he would see accomplished repeatedly. Paul was not called to do something *for* God, but called that God might do a mighty work *through* him.

Having written all of this, we now come to:

C. Paul's Greeting to the Saints in Rome (Rom. 1:7).

1:7 Paul was not writing to all of the citizens of Rome, but to all the saints in Rome. He called them the “beloved of God, called to be saints.” These are two very precious designations that the Spirit of God gave Paul to use for all of the people of God. Believers are the special objects of God’s redeeming love. He has called us out from our sin, out from the world, to be set apart for Himself. And the result of this calling is a change in heart and in lifestyle. We are called to be holy as the Apostle Peter declared in 1 Peter 1:15-16:

15 But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation;

16 Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy.

And then we have Paul’s familiar greeting, which, remember, is also a prayer. “Grace to you” – the title of John MacArthur’s radio ministry – “and peace,” both of which we need every day, God’s enabling grace and His gracious dealing with us, and a peace which surpasses all of our understanding. Cf. Isa. 26:3-4; Phil. 4:6-7. Please notice that this twofold supply is unlimited and inexhaustible because they are “from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.” This ought to be our prayer for every believer we pray for, as well as for ourselves. If you pray for me, pray that I will given His grace and His peace.

And now, as was usually Paul’s way, Paul’s prayer for the believers in Rome. I probably should have included the last part of verse 7 as well.

D. Paul’s Threefold Prayer (Rom. 1:8-13).

Prayer had a major place in the life of the Apostle Paul, and they also held an important place in his epistles. The epistle to the Romans is no exception. Remember that this was a church that he had not established (at least directly). Nor had he ever visited them. And yet we can see that they were constantly in his prayers.

1. Thanksgiving (v. 8).

2. Intercession (v. 9).

3. Request (vv. 10-13).

E. Paul’s Passion (Rom. 1:14-17).

1. “I am debtor” (v. 14).

2. “I am ready” (v. 15).

3. “I am not ashamed” (vv. 16-17).

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1:16 As I have mentioned a number of times, verses 16 and 17 give us the theme of the entire epistle. It not only gives us another definition of the Gospel, but it expresses Paul’s conviction about the Gospel. His whole life and ministry from the time that he was saved, witnessed to the fact that he was not ashamed of the Gospel. He had not the slightest doubt in his mind but that it was “the power of God unto salvation” for all who would believe it (put their trust in it), whether a person was a Jew or a Gentile. Like the prophets of the OT, Paul believed that there was only one way of salvation, and that was through Christ.

Thinking about being “ashamed” of the Gospel, I was reading yesterday in the first chapter of 2 Timothy, and I

noticed this word “ashamed” three times: in v. 8, v.12, and v. 16. (Read and explain each one.) Obviously Paul must have found this to be a big issue among believers. It is the same today. It seems like we can talk to people about almost anything, but when it comes to the Gospel, there is a tendency to hold back. This may be because we are quite sure that it is going to lose friends for us. Or we know that the attitude of most people is that they are not interested, and probably may think that the Gospel is not even true. Paul himself had hated the Gospel before the Lord stopped him on the road to Damascus. Immediately he was changed, and from that moment on, or shortly afterwards, his whole life was given to the spread of the Gospel. He knew it was true, and no one could have convinced him otherwise even though he became the object of persecution by those who formerly had been his allies.

You will notice that in these two verses, Rom. 1:16 and 17, Paul gave two reasons as to why he was not ashamed of the Gospel, each one introduced by the word “for”:

- 1) “For it is the power of God unto salvation . . .”
- 2) “For therein is the righteousness of God revealed . . .”

You can’t make these statements about any other religion. I hesitate to use the word “religion” about the Christian faith because it tends to make the Gospel just one of many religions which different people follow. Taking “salvation” to mean what the Apostle Paul explains it to mean here in this epistle, the Gospel includes justification, sanctification, and our ultimate glorification. And it all comes to us by grace through faith. All of the world religions are based upon works, not God’s work, but man’s work. None of them guarantee salvation because if you stop doing what the religion requires you to do, then all of the supposed merit that you have gained, is lost. Paul himself sought salvation and acceptance with God by his own obedience to the Mosaic Law before his eyes were opened to the truth of the Gospel. But you can see from what he wrote in Philippians 3 that after he was saved, he counted all of what he was before, and what he had done, as nothing more than mere “dung.” The Greek word is σκύβαλα, and Thayer says that it means “the excrement of animals.” Paul was not ridiculing people who sought to be honest and upright and good, but he was saying that presenting our works to a holy God was even worse than taking a “cow pie” to a king if you were seeking his favor. The Gospel is not a message telling us what we need to do for God, but it is a message telling us about what God has done for us. And more than that, “it is the power of God . . . “

1:17 “For therein is the righteousness of God revealed.” What was Paul seeking to tell the Roman believers (and us, too) about the Gospel? The Gospel tells us what satisfies, what is acceptable to a holy God. People are inclined to come up with what they think will satisfy God and give them acceptance with Him. But man’s plans always fall far short. All that will please God is perfect righteousness, and no human being is capable of anything like that. The Gospel is “the righteousness of God revealed”!

Trench says that “revealed” means that God made known that which is “unknown and unknowable” (p. 356). We would not know our need of salvation, nor the way of salvation, if God had not revealed it. That is what makes the Bible so important. It is a revelation from God.

“From faith to faith” is lit., *out of faith unto faith*. It has been interpreted various ways. As I think I expressed to you last week, it seems to carry with it the idea of progression, that salvation begins by faith and continues by faith. It leads to a life of trusting God. Some like Vine and Hodge believe that it means *by faith alone*. This is one of a couple of suggestions which MacArthur made, that salvation is completely upon the basis of faith, from beginning to end. It surely means that “it is not of works” (Eph. 2:8). And this is one of the two main reasons that Paul is not ashamed of the Gospel. It is not dependent upon man in any way. If it were, there would be no guarantee of any person’s salvation.

Every word in these two verses is extremely important. If we are to understand the Gospel and salvation, we

must believe what Paul has expressed here. Our faith comes from God, is strengthened by God, and will continue until we see God.

“The just shall live by faith” is a quotation from Hab. 2:4, and it is quoted again in Gal. 3:11 and Heb. 10:38, but I think that the emphasis is different in each NT quotation. Taking the statement as a whole it would mean that we enter into life by faith, and we continue as believers to live by faith, as I have said, trusting God. But I would suggest the following:

- 1) In Romans the emphasis is that “the just shall live by faith.”
- 2) In Galatians, “the just shall live by faith,” not by the works of the Law.
- 3) In Hebrews, “the just shall live by faith.” For example, in Heb. 11 we are told what Abel did by faith, what Enoch did by faith, what Abraham and Sarah did by faith, and so on through the chapter. They were living by faith.

Hopefully, with the truth of the Gospel firmly in our minds, we now begin the second major division of this epistle in which Paul firmly establishes man’s need of salvation, and I, and many others, have called it CONDEMNATION (Rom. 1:18-3:20).