Romans: Paul's Theological Magnum Opus

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Romans 1:11-1

I long to see you so that I
may impart to you some
spiritual gift to make you
strong - that is, that you and
I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.

But now that there is no more place for me to work in the regions, and since I have been longing for many years

to see you, I plan to do so

when I go to Spain.

I. Introduction

In this lesson we turn to the epistle of Paul to the Romans, perhaps his most famous letter of all and certainly one of the most influential, if not the most influential New Testament document throughout church history—influential in the conversion of such leading lights as Augustine, Martin Luther, and, in more recent years, Karl Barth. There are probably more commentaries on the epistle to the Romans than on any letter or on any book of Scripture over the course of church history. Why was this letter so distinct in its influence?

A. Circumstances

Part of the answer to that comes because of the circumstances, which in turn led to the distinctive contents of this, the sixth of the epistles of Paul that we are now surveying in chronological sequence as best as we can reconstruct it. This is the first letter that Paul writes to a church which he has not personally founded. He has not yet even visited the city of Rome as he writes this letter, although he hopes to come soon.

Romans 15:23-33 yields most of the information that enables us to reconstruct the circumstances surrounding Paul's penning this epistle. He has completed his third missionary journey, he has taken up the collection successfully with which 1 and 2 Corinthians were recently concerned, and now he is on his way from Corinth by boat to Jerusalem to deliver that collection. After that, because he believes he has now evangelized at least representative sections of the eastern half of the empire, he hopes to turn his sights to the west, to Rome, the heart and the capital of the empire, and then beyond Rome further west to Spain, to the uttermost parts of the earth by first-century standards.



Chrestus





Because he has not personally visited or become acquainted with the majority of the Roman Christians, therefore he takes the opportunity to write what is the lengthiest and most systematic presentation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as he understands it. And this, in large measure, accounts for the importance and influence of this document throughout Christian history. He writes in approximately the year 57, but there are some specific circumstances in the years immediately leading up to this date which also account for the nature of the teaching we find in Romans.

B. Setting

In the year 49, the emperor Claudius issued an edict expelling all Jews from Rome because of rioting, as one Roman historian later would describe it, at the instigation of somebody by the name of Chrestus. Chrestus is one letter different in Latin from the Latin word for Christ—Christus: and it looks suspiciously like a garbled attempt on the part of that later historian to describe some tension within the community of Jews and Christians. At any rate, Jewish Christians as well as non-Christian Jews were expelled as a result of this edict, though many then later returned after Claudius' death in the year 54. We must imagine, therefore, the Roman church in approximately 57, when Paul writes, as one that is not too far removed from having to come to grips with a sudden influx of Jewish believers to what, for a five-year period or so at least, was an exclusively Gentile Christian congregation. Instead of Jew and Gentile, replace with terms of contemporary warring ethnic groups, or competing races, and one understands the potentially volatile dynamic of the Roman church and the appeals to Jew and Gentile unity that punctuate Paul's letter to the Romans.

C. Organization

Here is a letter which indeed is very systematically organized. It has been described as an ambassadorial letter, paving the way for Paul's meeting with the Christians there. Curiously, Romans 16 includes the longest list of greetings to any group of Christians in any of Paul's letters, and yet this comes in that letter, the first we have seen thus far, to a church that Paul did not found. Some scholars have been so struck by this apparent inconsistency that they

omans 1:16-17

All roads lead to Rome



Organization of Romans



For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written:
"The righteous will live by faith."

have proposed theories that Romans 16 really belonged on the end of some other letter, such as Ephesians, initially. There is probably a much simpler and better explanation. There was an ancient proverb that all roads led to Rome, and this was not just a geographical hyperbole but also a reflection of the mass migration of many rural peoples to Rome in the first century. Rome was the center of trade and of travel, and it is not surprising that many Christians Paul would have met in other places in the empire, Aquila and Priscilla being one known example of such, might have eventually gravitated to or returned to Rome, so that Paul greets as many people as he has some contact with in order to smooth the way for his acceptance among the majority of Gentile Christians who he had not personally previously encountered.

The letter to the Romans falls very neatly into two sections, though of disproportionate weight. There is the typical theological exposition (Romans 1-11), following the introduction, the greetings, and thanksgiving; Romans 1:16-17 give a brief thesis statement; and then all the way through to the end of chapter 11 we have in neatly organized fashion the theology of the Gospel in clear, distinct stages. Chapters 12 through the middle of chapter 15, 15:13 to be specific, then turn to the ethics, or the exhortation of the Gospel, that flows from the theology Paul has enunciated in these first 11 chapters.

II. Justification by Faith (1:1-5:21)

If we go back, then, to subdivide the first and larger theological section of Paul's writing, we notice how he begins in 1:16-17. He is not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of salvation unto both Jew and Greek. And it is a salvation which comes by faith from first to last. Just as in Galatians, Romans is concerned, at times in even more detail, to expound the theme of justification by faith alone, apart from the works of the law, as the central defining doctrine of the Christian message. But before Paul unpacks that theme of justification by faith, which, in fact, he does unpack beginning in 3:21, he moves back, chronologically and theologically as it were, in 1:18-3:20, to establish the universal sinfulness of humanity.

Universality of Sin

Sin of the Gentiles:

Sin of the Jews:

Romans 1:18-32

Romans 2:1-3:20

Romans 1:22-23

Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images...

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

omans 2:2:

You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?

A. Universal Sinfulness

To put it very simply, before he can describe the Savior, he has to point out the need for salvation. Romans 1:18-3:20, therefore, fall into two subsections—the easier thesis to establish, at least by first-century Jewish standards (namely the universal sinfulness of the Gentile world), which occupies 1:18-32. But then, lest any Jews tempted to be smug in their agreement with Paul's description of all of the proverbial Gentile sins and vices think that they themselves are somehow exempt from this indictment, 2:1-3:20 turns to show how Jews, too, stand guilty before God so that in 3:9-20 Paul can demonstrate the universality that no one is righteous, no, not one, and that no one can be saved by works of law.

In that first subsection (1:19-32), Paul refers not only to particular vices, but points out the theological heart of idolatry—namely, worshiping the creature rather than the Creator—and also the moral or ethical heart of idolatry—the heterosexual and homosexual sinfulness for which the Greco-Roman morals were legendary. In these verses also appear the seeds of what philosophers of the Christian faith would later develop and call the cosmological and the moral arguments for God's existence. In 1:19-20 we read that all peoples of the world, whether or not they have the law, or God's special revelation, should know from the creation that there is a Creator, and in 1:32 that there is a universal sense of morality—not that all cultures are equally agreed on everything that is right or wrong, but that all cultures have a standard of right or wrong.

As C. S. Lewis put it so colloquially and famously, humans are the only creatures to blush, or to have any need to. This shows that we are uniquely created in the image of one who has moral standards, something that cannot be said of the rest of the animal kingdom. Chapter 2:1 and following, as we have mentioned, then turns to point out that Jews who do have the law do not uniformly or consistently live up to the law, and therefore they, too, stand guilty before God. Having established this need for a Savior, Romans 3:21 then returns to Paul's initial thesis, that salvation is through Christ by faith alone. And 3:21-31 may be seen as a thesis paragraph, unpacking that brief one-sentence statement of the heart of the Gospel.

ienesis 15:6

Abram believed the LORD and he credited it to him as righteousness.

ADAM

CHRIST

B. Two Metaphors

We have already seen in Paul's previous correspondence how he uses the terms "justification" and "reconciliation" to summarize what was done, through well-known metaphors of the ancient world, in Christ's atoning death. He repeats the theme of justification here again, and adds two new metaphors, also well-known from the ancient world—the metaphor of propitiation, a sacrifice of atonement, the metaphor that was taken from the temple cult referring to animal sacrifices that were offered to appease God's wrath so that he might turn aside from human sin. In this context appears also the theological term "redemption," which again originally was simply a very common, ordinary metaphor, this time taken from the world of the slave market. Redemption was the ransom price that was paid to buy back a slave's freedom, to make him or her a free person.

C. Faith Lived Out

Chapters 4 and 5 elaborate the theme of justification, chapter 4 doing so in more detail but in similar fashion to one of the ways we have seen Paul adopt in the letter to the Galatians—by going back to the example of Abraham as the first Israelite, who was reckoned righteous through his faith (Genesis 15). Chapter 5 proceeds to discuss the results of justification and falls into two sections: the first section dealing with the peace, the absence of objective enmity, between God and humankind, and the joy—joy that can remain even in the midst of suffering, that results from the knowledge that no matter what this life may throw at us we have an eternal life hidden in Christ with God that no one can damage or take from us.

The second half of Romans 5:12-21 is an extremely important passage in the history of Christian theology, as it enunciates further results of justification coming from the fact that Christ was our Second Adam, the new Adam, the new progenitor of the human race—who remained sinless, where the first Adam and his wife Eve, fell. Paul points out similarities between the old Adam and the new Adam, Jesus. Both were individual men; both acted in certain ways that affected the entire human race. And, in each case, one particular action—Adam's original sin

Paul's Adam-Christ Typology: Romans 5:12-21

Similarities:

- · Individual me
- Actions affected whole race
- · One action was the key

Differences:

- · Sin vs. salvation
- · One sin vs. many as cause
- Definite condemnation vs. opportunity for salvation

What shall we say, then?
Shall we go on sinning so
that grace may increase? By
no means! We died to sin;
how can we live in it any
longer?

Romans 6, 7, and 8

Chapter 6:

Freedom from Sin

Chapter 7:

Freedom from the Law

Chapter 8:

Freedom from Death

and Christ's atoning death—was the key that influenced those who would follow them. But Paul also makes it clear that there are key dissimilarities between the old and new Adam, or between Adam and Christ. Adam's action led to sin, whereas Christ's leads to salvation. Adam's action was one sin, but there were many sins that caused the need for Christ's atonement. And while definitely all people who are heirs of Adam were condemned, not all of humanity will automatically be saved in Christ, but rather those who are in Christ because they have accepted his free gift of eternal life and therefore are rightly related to him.

III. Sanctification (6:1-8:39)

Chapters 6-8 then move us to the next phase in Paul's systematic, progressive enunciation of the Christian Gospel. From the theme of justification and all of its ramifications as one enters into the Christian life, Paul turns to the topic of sanctification the Christian life as a process, as a process of growth in holiness and of being not only rightly related to God but transformed progressively by the spirit which he causes to dwell within us. One very attractive and simple outline of Romans 6, 7, and 8 is to see each of these successive chapters addressing the issues of freedom: freedom in chapter 6 from sin, freedom from law in chapter 7, and freedom from death in chapter 8. As we read the way Paul unpacks these three themes, it is clear that he is not saying Christians in this life are absolutely free from any one of these three elements. Christians clearly still sin, and the Christian life is not one of antinomianism, an anything goes anti-law mentality. There are clear ethical or moral, we might even say legal, standards. But they are not those unchanged of the Old Testament law in all of its details from the writings and books of Moses. Neither are Christians exempt from physical death, merely from the spiritual death that accompanies that physical death for all of those who are unregenerate. If we focus on just a few important exegetical highlights of these three chapters. Romans 6-8, we may, then, enunciate the following.

A. Chapter 6

In Romans 6:1-4, the process begins with baptism. Some have read these verses as teaching that Christians must be baptized to be saved, but 1 Corinthians 10:2 gives the lie to this interpretation, where Paul speaks of those who are

Romans 6:4

We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

lomans 7:15

For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.

omans 7:25

Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.



metaphorically baptized under Moses in the wilderness, nevertheless in a majority of cases paying the physical and spiritual penalties for their sin and rebellion. Nevertheless, 6:1-4 reminds us, in the book of Romans, of a commonplace in early Christian belief and practice—namely, that baptism naturally and regularly followed closely on the heels of Christian profession of faith as a profound symbolism of our death and burial with Christ, and therefore should be considered the natural form of Christian practice in any time and place. The rest of Romans 6, however, makes it clear that Christians continue to have sin in their lives, although Christian commentators are divided on exactly how to explain Paul's language of the old and new natures.

B. Chapter 7

This tension that Christians continue to face, however, between the presence of sin and a renewed heart and spirit comes to a climax in Romans 7:14-25, where Paul detects a profound and poignant conflict that goes on within him and presumably all people, as he uses the first person singular to represent universal human experience. "I don't do what I want to do; what I want to do I don't do." There is a profound tension within him that ultimately he can be victorious over only as Jesus Christ frees himself from it. The way this chapter ends, however, by announcing the victory in the first part of Romans 7:25 but then concluding that he still serves sin in his body, suggests that he is speaking as a Christian—although admittedly not all Christians have taken his language this way. It does seem, however, to be a profound spiritual truth that even as one grows in sanctification, in holiness, becomes more mature in the Christian life, one becomes more profoundly aware of the vast gulf which separates humanity from God.

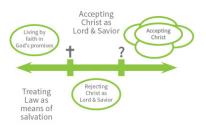
God's standards may not have changed (they have always been absolute and perfect), but our perception of them has changed and improved, and actually increases the gap between our perception of ourselves and our perception of the utterly perfect and holy standards before God. Christians who are wrestling with persistent sin, unable seemingly to conquer it, and yet profoundly upset about this experience, can take at least some consolation in the fact that the very wrestling that they are experiencing probably conclusively demonstrates that they are true

Romans 8:1

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,...

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him...

Destinies of the Jews



Destinies of the Gentiles



Christians. Only in Christ, it may be argued, is such tension so extreme. Outside of Christ, they perhaps might not have been nearly as upset with such tension.

C. Chapter 8

Chapter 8, nevertheless, proceeds to stress the victory that Christians can experience over sin, the happiness and joy that the fact eternally they stand completely free from condemnation (Romans 8:1), and the life through the Spirit that can begin successively to transform them. Romans 8 thus includes such famous passages as verse 28, that God works all things together for good; or another perhaps slightly better way to translate it is that God works in all things together for good, since not everything that happens to us is good but God can use all circumstances as part of His sovereign plan. Verses 29-30 introduce us to the vexed questions of predestination and election that culminate in the believer's glorification. The chapter concludes with a ringing promise that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus.

IV. Problem of Israel's Unbelief (9:1-11:36)

We cannot hope to solve all of the theological problems surrounding predestination and election, although it is interesting, as chapter 9 unfolds, to notice that most of the examples Paul uses are more corporate in nature than individual—the different groups throughout the Old Testament that were or were not part of God's elect people, even though nothing is, at times, said about their spiritual salvation. At any rate, Romans 9-11 turn to the final topic in Paul's theological exposition, which at first glance seems unnecessary or out of place since chapter 8 has brought us to the resounding conclusion that one day we will be perfectly glorified. Nevertheless, first-century logic demands that Paul say something about what he does in Romans 9-11. He has been claiming that this Christian Gospel, in fact, is the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel, and yet he is writing to a church that is largely Gentile in its nature, and writing at a time when more Gentiles than Jews are responding positively to the Gospel. Does this not cancel out his claims? Romans 9, 10, and 11 can be seen, in turn, as giving three answers to this question.

Isaiah cries out concerning
Israel: Though the number of
the Israelites be like the sand
by the sea, only the remnant
will be saved.

If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—His good, pleasing and perfect will.

First, Romans 9:1-29 points out that throughout even Old Testament history more often than not only a remnant of the Israelites were truly obedient—so that if a majority of them are rejecting the Christian Gospel, unfortunately, this can be said only to be in keeping with what often was the case in generations past. Secondly, from 9:30-10:21 Paul makes the point that what went wrong for the Jews, those who have not responded positively to the Gospel, as in generations past, were that they treated the law as if it was a means of works righteousness, rather than a way of relating through faith and obedience to the salvation that God had already wrought for them.

This chapter concludes the famous early Christian confession, the shortest known summary of what it meant to confess publicly that one was a believer or follower of Jesus, in 10:9-10, with the statement "Jesus is Lord"—rather than Caesar. And in this context, "Lord" must mean both "God" and "master." Chapter 10:14-21 also contains that famous evangelistic call to preach the Gospel so that all might hear. Chapter 11 concludes the theological section of Paul's treatment with the third answer to the question of "What went wrong?" or "Why are so many Jews rejecting the Gospel?" with a reminder that this is only temporary, that it is meant to provoke the Jews into jealously, so that they, too, just as the Gentiles are now responding, will respond with faith in Christ—Paul's famous olive tree metaphor.

V. Christian Life and Service (12:1-15:13)

Chapters 12 and following then turn to the ethics that flow from the Gospel, and may be outlined briefly in terms of a sequence of how Christians are to respond. Verses 1-2 enunciate the basic principle of transformation of both body and mind. Verses 3-8 then call on each believer to identify his or her spiritual gifts, and to exercise them faithfully. Romans 12:9-13:14 then give a miscellany of exhortations framed by the theme of love, which may well be seen to permeate this entire section. It's probably not coincidental that this sequence of gifts followed by exercising them in love is identical to what we saw in 1 Corinthians 12 and 13. An important part of what it means to love includes submission to the governing authorities (13:1 and following), although it is important to remember from the model of Peter himself and others throughout Scripture that obedience to human authorities never takes precedence over obedience to God; and if God's will contradicts those of human authorities, God must be obeyed rather than people. Romans 14:1-15:13



concludes the body of Paul's letter by returning to the identical theme we saw in 1 Corinthians 8-10, that of food sacrificed to idols, and makes many of the same points about the weaker and stronger brothers or sisters in the city of Rome.

VI. Conclusion (15:14-16:27)

With 15:14-16:27, we then read of Paul's personal plans and the concluding greetings, both of which we have already discussed in our introduction to the letter. Romans, in sum, then, is the most complete and systematic exposition of Paul's, even though it does appeal to specific circumstances in which unity over nationalist, tribalist, or racist prejudices must triumph. It has been influential throughout the history of the church, and repays reading again and again in almost every contemporary Christian context, at whatever point in our journeys of faith we are along the road. It contains some of the most precious promises that God guarantees that He will bring us to the completion of that journey successfully.