

THE EPISTLE TO THE
ROMANS



AN OUTLINED COMMENTARY

by

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ALL roads in the Bible are seen most clearly from Romans, and when the message of Romans gets into a man's heart there is no telling what may happen.

J. I. Packer

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
Introduction		1
1.	1:1-7 Salutation in the Gospel	8
2.	1:8-15 Introduction to the Gospel	18
3.	1:16-17 Theme, the Gospel of the Righteousness of God	24
4.	1:18-3:20 The Unrighteousness of Man, the Bad News	32
5.	3:21-31 The Righteousness of God, the Good News	87
6.	4:1-25 The Old Testament Confirmation of the Gospel	121
7.	5:1-21 The Reign of Grace over the Reign of sin	138
8.	6:1-23 The Reign of Grace and Sanctified Liberation	171
9.	7:1-25 The Reign of Grace and the Law	201
10.	8:1-39 The Reign of Grace through the Spirit of the Gospel	225
11.	9:1-33 The Gospel and Israel's Election	268
12.	10:1-21 The Gospel and Israel's Defection	296
13.	11:1-36 The Gospel and Israel's Salvation	311
14.	12:1-15:33 The Gospel and its Responsibilities	346
15.	16:1-24 Farewell Greetings in the Gospel	400
16.	16:25-27 Farewell benediction in the Gospel	411

PREFACE

Every Christian pastor ought to preach through Romans, and the commentary that follows represents this pastor's attempt to wrestle with this magisterial revelation of the only gospel of the saving grace of God. Obviously editing has led to the addition of much material that, while not being suitable for the preaching mode, yet is helpful, indeed vital, for the discipline of preaching preparation.

THE EPISTLE TO THE

ROMANS

The Gospel of the Righteousness of God

INTRODUCTION

A. THE IMPORTANCE OF ROMANS

The Epistle to the Romans, written by the Apostle Paul, is arguably the quintessential book of the whole Bible when it comes to discovering the Christian gospel in its most clear, profound and soul-expanding expression. Therefore it is not surprising that the corridors of Christian church history are strewn with exultant and powerful testimonies to the glorious message of reigning grace that this Epistle so magnifies. Some examples are as follows.

1. Aurelius [Saint] Augustine of North Africa, that great victor over the man-centered and heretical doctrine of Pelagius during the early fifth century, was converted in 386 AD when he overheard a child sing in Latin, “Tolle, lege! tolle, lege!” meaning, “Take up and read! take up and read.” Depressed over his sinful lifestyle, he picked up a scroll of Romans where he “randomly” opened it to 13:13-14 and read,

not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof (Rom. 13:13b-14). No further would I read, nor had I any need; instantly, at the end of this sentence, a clear light flooded my heart and all the darkness of doubt vanished away.¹

There and then Augustine believed and was genuinely converted with the result that the Christian church gained one of its most notable theologians.

2. Martin Luther’s quest to discover “a righteous God” eventually found its satisfaction in Romans. He explains:

I greatly longed to understand Paul’s epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, ‘the justice of God,’ because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. . . . Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. . . . Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that ‘the just shall live by his faith’ [Rom. 1:17]. Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of

¹ Aurelius Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 8, Chapter 12.

Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas the ‘justice of God’ had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven.²

Later in the preface to his commentary on Romans, which passage was instrumental in the conversion of John Wesley, Luther writes:

This Epistle is in truth the chief part of the New Testament and the purest Gospel. It would be quite proper for a Christian, not only to know it by heart word for word, but also to study it daily, for it is the soul’s daily bread. It can never be read or meditated too much and too well. The more thoroughly it is treated, the more precious it becomes, and the better it tastes.³

3. John Calvin declared that, “when one gains a knowledge of this Epistle, he has an entrance opened to him to all the most hidden treasures of Scripture.”⁴ In the succeeding Puritan heirs of the Genevan expositor, William Haller describes how, “they urged the people to base their understanding of the word of God upon Paul’s epistle to the Romans. If one began one’s study of scripture at that point, William Perkins advised, and then went to the gospel of John, one had the key to the whole.”⁵

4. Martyn Lloyd-Jones has more recently commented:

It has been the universal opinion in the Christian church throughout the centuries that Romans is the Epistle above all which deals with fundamentals, and if you look at the history of the church I think you will see that has been borne out time and time again. There is a sense in which we can say quite truthfully that the epistle to the Romans has, possibly, played a more important and a more crucial part in the history of the church than any other single book in the whole of the Bible.⁶

5. John Murray, in the preface of his superior commentary, makes the following requisite acknowledgment:

The epistle to the Romans is God’s Word. Its theme is the gospel of his grace. And the gospel bespeaks the marvels of his condescension and love. If we are not overwhelmed by the glory of that gospel and ushered into the holy of holies of God’s presence, we have missed the grand purpose of this sacred deposit. And it is only because the grace of God has put treasure in earthen vessels that we men have been given the task and privilege of undertaking exposition.⁷

6. Robert Horn, in his clear and helpful explanation of the doctrine of justification by faith, published under the title of *God Free!* gives us a contemporary and very

² Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand*, pp. 49-50.

³ Martin Luther, *Preface to the Epistle to the Romans*, p. 1.

⁴ John Calvin, *Epistle to the Romans*, p. xxix.

⁵ William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism*, p. 87. He further quotes Thomas Draxe who said that, “The Epistle to the Romans . . . is like to nothing less than paradise itself, enclosing ‘the Quintessence and perfection of saving Doctrine,’ and the eighth chapter . . . is like a conduit conveying the waters of life; rather it is the tree of life in the midst of the garden,” *ibid.*

⁶ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans - An Exposition of Chapter 1*, p. 3.

⁷ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, I, p. xi.

relevant illustration of the power of Romans to challenge this modern generation, in much the same way that Augustine and others have been challenged. He writes:

We have to come to terms with God. We may not like the thought, but this is the root problem of living. Sometimes people recognize this almost in spite of themselves. This happened recently in one university. The Christian Union held a book week, selling a particular title from door to door in the student residences and also on four bookstalls round the campus. Along with the book they distributed a free hand-out in tabloid form, the contents of which were simply Paul's words in Romans (chapters 1 and 2) about the wrath of God and the nature and extent of human sin.

Student reaction was very definite. One girl came up to a bookstall and said accusingly, 'You're making us all feel guilty!' The Gay Society took sharp exception to Paul's plain speaking. Some of the Student Union committee tried to get copies banned and the Christian Union ejected. The student newspaper published irate letters. Why were people so incensed? Why should a 1,900-year-old letter provoke them so much? Christian Union members commented that it was not the 'Smile, Jesus loves you' approach that prompted these reactions. It was the truth about the basic relationship of God and man - the truths of wrath and sin and judgment.⁸

B. THE BACKGROUND TO ROMANS

1. The Historical Setting.

a. Authorship.

Both conservative and liberal scholarship, as well as the early church fathers, agree that the Apostle Paul is the author of Romans as is plainly declared in 1:1, though 16:22 indicates that, as was customary, he used an amanuensis or scribe named Tertius.

b. The place of Paul's writing.

Having completed a tumultuous and fruitful ministry in Ephesus lasting near three years, Paul has moved to Corinth for three months and there writes Romans, approximately three years before his eventual arrival in Rome. He composed his epistle in the home of Gaius, his host (16:22), using Tertius as an amanuensis, 16:22, and most likely Phoebe for the purpose of hand delivery (16:1-2).

c. The time of Paul's writing.

The aforementioned brief stay at Corinth, in the midst of Paul's third missionary journey, was most likely during the spring of 58 AD. The Apostle is desirous of returning to Jerusalem and prefers that he would arrive there in time for the Feast of Pentecost (Acts 20:16).

⁸ Robert Horn, *Go Free!*, pp. 7-8.

- d. The destination of Paul's writing.
- (1) Evidently the church at Rome had been established for some time, though the circumstances of its origin are unknown. The church that Paul addresses, or at least one of its assemblies, meets in the house of Prisca [Priscilla] and Aquila (16:3-5), who previously had met Paul in Corinth and then traveled with him to Ephesus (Acts 18:1-3, 24-26).
 - (2) Although the Jews had been expelled from Rome during the reign of Emperor Claudius, yet at the accession of Nero they were permitted to return, about 54 AD. Acts 28:23-29 indicates a vocal Jewish community had resettled in Rome, though this is not to suggest that anti-Semitism had receded since, "The roster of ancient writers who expressed anti-Jewish feeling reads like a roster for a second-semester course in classics: Cicero, Tacitus, Martial, Horace, Juvenal, Persius, Dio Cassius, Marcus Aurelius, Apuleius, Ovid, Petronius, Pliny the Elder, Plutarch, Quintilian, Seneca, Suetonius."⁹
 - (3) While the constituency of the church that Paul addresses seems to include a considerable number of Jews (1:16; 2:1-29; 3:29-30; 4:11; 9:1-11:36; 16:1-23), yet there are good reasons for believing that this Christian assembly at Rome was predominantly Gentile. First, the introduction, as would be expected, addresses the predominant constituency, namely, "we [who] have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among *the Gentiles* [emphasis added] for His name's sake, among whom *you also* [emphasis added] are the called of Jesus Christ" (1:5-6; cf. the related inference, 1:13). Second, the manner in which Jewish concerns are injected, in an adjunct, though none-the-less significant, way (2:17-3:2; 7:1). This is particularly so with the distinctive Jewish emphasis of 9-11 that qualifies the universal thrust of the gospel in 1-8. Thus Gentiles are the primary addressees. Third, the conclusion (16:1-23) addresses various church members and associates, of which approximately 80% have Gentile names.¹⁰

2. The social setting.

While the architectural splendor of Rome is proverbial, along with its patrician government and polytheism, yet a broader plebeian perspective is necessary for us to understand the profound concerns of the Apostle Paul as he writes his Epistle:

Within a circuit of little more than twelve miles more than two millions of inhabitants were crowded. . . . The free citizens were more than a million: . . . the vast number of these would be poor. . . . Yet were these pauper citizens proud of their citizenship, though many of them had no better sleeping-place for the night than the public porticoes or the vestibules of temples. They cared for nothing beyond bread for the day, the games of the Circus, and the savage delight of gladiatorial shows. Manufactures and trade they regarded as the business of the slave and foreigner. The number of the slaves was perhaps about a million. . . . Every kind of nationality and religion found its representative in

⁹ Mark Nanos, quoting J. Meagher, "As The Twig Was Bent," *The Mystery of Romans*, p. 65.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 77-9.

Rome. . . . Rome was like London with all its miseries, vices, and follies exaggerated, and without Christianity.¹¹

It is significant that for all of its vaunted splendor and might in worldly terms, Romans does not contain the slightest intimation of the Apostle's admiration for any of the notable features of the imperial city, as is likewise the case in Acts when he visited Athens (Acts 17:16).

C. THE PURPOSES OF ROMANS

Whatever the peripheral circumstances may have been, such as the state of the church at Rome and the role of the Jews in that congregation, yet it seems to stand out with the greatest clarity that Paul's purpose in general was doctrinal with regard to many aspects of the gospel. In 1:11-15 he passionately desires that the saints "be established" or "strengthened" through his gifted ministry, v. 11, that there be mutual encouragement, v. 12, that spiritual fruitfulness be stimulated, v. 13, and that preeminently these ends might be produced through his eagerness, "to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome," v. 15. Note that Paul desires to "evangelize" true believers, that is preach the gospel to the converted here.¹² The whole of Romans is an eloquent testimony to the Apostle's primary desire that Christians in Rome should grow in their understanding and reflection of the gospel. It may be that the lack of problems at Rome, which characterized the church at Corinth, enabled him to present more mature doctrine in accord with his assessment that, "the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you." 16:19. A summary of Paul's gospel purposes is as follows:

1. Romans is designed to edify believers with an expanded understanding of the gospel.
 - a. In the realm of sin's exceeding sinfulness.
 - b. In the realm of justification through faith.
 - c. In the realm of vital identification with Jesus Christ.
 - d. In the realm of the reign of grace in contrast with the law.
 - e. In the realm of sanctification through walking in the Spirit.
 - f. In the realm of loving relationships in local church life.
2. Romans is designed to stimulate assurance with an expanded understanding of the gospel.
3. Romans is designed to explain the integral relationship of Jew and Gentile with regard to the gospel.

¹¹ Conybeare and Howson, *The Life and Epistles of Paul*, p. 737.

¹² "[I]t is more natural to take 'you' to refer to Roman Christians; in this case, 'preach the gospel' will refer to the ongoing work of teaching and discipleship that builds on initial evangelization." Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 65.

4. Romans is designed to stimulate practical Christian living as a consequence of faith in the gospel.

D. THE KEY WORD IN ROMANS - RIGHTEOUSNESS

1. The word “righteousness,” δικαιοσύνη, *dikaiosunē*, is Paul’s key gospel term, “the dominating theme of this epistle,”¹³ not love, as a consideration of 1:17; 3:21-22; 4:6, 11, 13; 5:17, 18, 21; 6:13-20; 8:3-4, 10; 9:30-31; 10:3-10; 14:17 amply indicates. The cognates “justice,” δίκη, *dikē*, and “justification,” δικαίωσις, *dikaiōsis*, likewise reflect the fundamental meaning of moral straightness or rightness, whether essential, reflected, demanded, provided, or vindicated, that in both the Old and New Testaments is chiefly sourced in the holy or righteous character of God.
 2. Righteousness as an Old Testament term.
 - a. God *is* righteous, that is morally, ethically straight (Ezra 9:15; Ps. 7:9; 119:138-8, 142; cf. John 17:11, 25). Righteousness is the positive aspect of God’s holiness (Is. 6:3).
 - b. God *demand*s righteousness, that is he requires that man be righteous in both his being and doing even as God is righteous (Deut. 7:9; Ps. 4:5).
 - c. God *saves* with righteousness, that is he maintains holy moral consistency in the gracious saving of sinners (Isa. 45:8, 20-25; 46:12-13; 51:5-8; 61:1-3, 10-11). Thus Messiah is a righteous or just Savior (Zech. 9:9).
 - d. God *sanctifies* unto righteousness, that is he communicates or imparts righteousness unto his children to whom righteousness has been gratuitously imputed, like a cloak (Isa. 61:10-11).
 3. Righteousness as a New Testament term for the gospel.
 - a. The gospel is the gift of righteousness from a righteous God (Rom. 3:21-24; 4:5; 5:17, 21) to unrighteous man (Rom. 1:18, 29; 2:8).
 - b. The gospel is the gift of righteousness to the unrighteous that vindicates and justifies a righteous God (Rom. 3:25-26).
 - c. The gospel is the gift of righteousness to the unrighteous that is productive of a righteous lifestyle (Rom. 6:13, 18; I John 2:29; 3:7;
 - d. Illustration. Nicolaus von Zinzendorf’s wonderful hymn well expresses the love of Paul for God’s saving righteousness.

¹³ C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 29.

Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness,
 My beauty are, my glorious dress;
 Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,
 With joy shall I lift up my head.

O let the dead now hear Thy voice,
 Now bid Thy banished ones rejoice,
 Their beauty this, their glorious dress,
 Jesus, the Lord our righteousness.

E. SEVEN IMPORTANT GOSPEL PRINCIPLES

1. The gospel is primarily about God, not man. Certainly the gospel is for man, but at its heart, the gospel is good news about the being and doing of God (Rom. 3:21; I Cor. 1:30; Eph. 2:4-5).
2. The gospel is first of all a moral rather than a relational matter (Is. 59:2). The moral chasm of alienation between God as holy and man as unholy is a result of moral conflict; when this gulf is bridged by means of the gospel of the righteousness of God, then a true relationship is established. Thus a sinner must be right with God before he can be reconciled to God.
3. The bad news is essentially about man's unrighteousness and ungodliness, his thorough pollution before a righteous God on a vertical level (Rom. 3:9-18), not his tarnished self-image, his social imperfection, his relative righteousness on a mere horizontal level.
4. God's grace freely offered is yet righteous grace; His salvation is righteous; He, being absolutely righteous, saves with integrity (Rom. 3:36; I John 1:9) by means of a gospel of righteousness.
5. God's grace is sovereign and dynamic; it energizes, motivates, preserves, and triumphantly reigns over the plague of sin (Rom. 5:17, 21); such a gospel of grace is the ground of Christian sanctification.
6. Faith is non-meritorious, self-renouncing linkage with the God of the Bible who alone is the saving hope of the believer. Hence the transitive nature of faith, not being able to stand alone, must be gauged as true faith according the character of its object (Rom. 3:22; 4:13).
7. The grasp of the doctrine of Romans 1-11 is only proven to be genuine when the expectations of Romans 12-16 are demonstrable, especially 12:1-21; 13:8-15:6, within the perimeter of local church life.