

SESSION 4: Romans

Four main points

1. Background
2. Theme
3. Issues
4. Application

1. Background

Reading: Romans 1:1-32; 3:9-26

2. Theme

Reading: Romans 2:28-29; 4:1-5, 13-25; 5:1-11

3. Issues

Reading: Romans 6:19-23; 7:14-25; 8:1-21

4. Application

Reading: Romans 8:22-39; 10:1-17; 12:1-8; 16:25-27

Discussion questions:

The great theme of Romans is 'justification by faith' – how can we express that simply today?

'God will forgive me, so it does not matter how I live' – what would Paul think of such a statement?

1. Background

According to tradition Rome was founded on seven hills in 753 B.C. It was a meeting place and a melting pot for people and ideas. Rome became the capital of a great empire. In New Testament times it probably had a population in excess of one million.

As Roman control of Italy and Mediterranean lands extended, Roman citizenship was conferred on a number of people who were not Roman by birth. Paul was born in Tarsus a major town in Cilicia. The grant of Roman citizenship was within the power of generals and it is possible that under Pompey, or one of the other generals, Roman citizenship had been granted to Paul's father or grandfather, giving Paul the status of a Roman citizen by birth. However, by the time he wrote his great letter to the Romans Paul had still not visited the capital of the empire. The empire stretched from Britain in the west across Europe to Arabia. Rome became the centre of politics and trade for the known world. Its citizens benefited from the Roman peace (*pax Romana*), that made travel safe, and the excellent roads. Constant comings and goings made Rome a wealthy and cosmopolitan city.

It is not known who founded the church at Rome, certainly neither Paul nor Peter. According to Ambrosiaster (4th century), unnamed Hebrew Christians rather than one of the apostles established the church at Rome, where there had been a Jewish community since the second century B.C. Perhaps those who returned there after the Day of Pentecost took the gospel to Rome. The secular historian Suetonius records that the Emperor Claudius banished Jews from Rome in A.D. 49 or 50 because of rioting over one called 'Chrestus' (the confusion of 'i' and 'e' was not unknown in Latin renditions of Greek). It is possible to conclude from this statement that the Roman Jews had become unusually agitated and disorderly over the proclamation in their midst of Jesus as the Christ (Christus), provoking the emperor to take action against them. By the time Paul wrote his great letter, the church at Rome had become famous far and wide for its faith (1:8). There are passages in the letter that are of great interest to Jews (especially chapters 9-11) but it seems that the majority of the recipients were Gentiles (1:13; 11:13; 11:28-31; 15:15-16).

The letter to the Romans is rather more formal than Paul's other letters, presumably because Paul had not visited the church. Paul intended to visit Rome but had been prevented from doing so. It is possible that Paul wrote this letter to Rome to prepare the Christians in the capital for his arrival so that Rome could become a strategic base for his mission in the west, as Antioch had been his base in the east. Paul had already preached the gospel in the strategic centres of population at the eastern end of the Mediterranean basin. Later he wanted to journey through Rome and on to Spain to plant the gospel there (15:22-28). He hoped to encourage the Christians at Rome, strengthening their faith and winning their support for his continued mission.

It is also possible that Paul realised that he might never reach Rome in person. A passage requesting prayer for his safety and success follows the section that sets out his plan for future mission on his journey to Judea before leaving for Rome (15:31). If that were to be the case then Paul would need to write a systematic and comprehensive letter to Rome so that the church could continue his work, proclaiming the gospel to the farthest parts of the empire.

Paul was on his third missionary journey, staying in Corinth, when he wrote this letter to Rome (probably about A.D. 57). It was the last letter written before his prolonged period of detention. He had just completed the collection for the Jerusalem church (15:25-26) and was staying at the home of Gaius (16:23), one of the most prominent of converts during the apostle's mission at Corinth (1Cor 1:14). Erastus (16:23) was the City Treasurer of Corinth. It would be an intelligent guess that Phoebe (16:1-2) carried the letter from Corinth to Rome.

2. Theme

Some of the themes in Romans are familiar from Paul's earlier letters to the Galatians, Thessalonians and Corinthians. Themes that are familiar from the Corinthian correspondence are also addressed in Romans. These include such matters as food (14:1–15:6), the analogy of the one body with many parts (12:3-8), the comparison between Adam and Christ (5:12–19) and the collection for Jerusalem (15:25–32). The letter that has most similarities with Romans is Galatians. In Galatians, Paul raises the fundamental question of how someone might be justified (put in a right relationship) with God. Paul taught that this was by the work of Christ whose death gained his people's redemption and made them right with God, not by works of the law (Galatians 2:16), a doctrine commonly called 'justification by faith' but more accurately described as 'justification by grace through faith'.

In Romans, Paul gives the doctrine of justification by grace through faith its most thorough and systematic treatment. After a short introduction Paul states his theme (1:16-17). Everything that comes after is an exposition of that theme. Justification is needed because of human sinfulness (1:18-3:20) among Jews and Gentiles, who alike are morally bankrupt. Individual 'sins' are symptoms of the big problem 'sin'. Paul concludes that no one can hope to be pronounced righteous (in a right standing before God on the basis of any merit or work of their own). The only hope of salvation is the grace of God. God's remedy for sin is justification (3:21-5:21). God in his grace has made it possible for men and women to be put the right with him. This is through the work of Christ, who by his sacrificial death has made full atonement for our sins. The way to benefit from the work of Christ is by faith. Paul contrasts the unbeliever's position in Adam, where there is sin and death, with the believer's position in Christ, where there is righteousness and eternal life. The basis of Abraham's acceptance by God was not his circumcision, or any comparable 'work', but his *faith*: 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness' (4:3). Abraham is the spiritual father of all believers, whether Jews or Gentiles. The true children of Abraham are those who have faith in God and are therefore justified by his grace.

After setting out the basis of the doctrine, Paul explores what it will mean in practice. The outcome of justification should be sanctification. That is Christians are called to holy living (chapters 6-8). Sanctification has nothing to do with keeping Old Testament law, which could only give a sense of failure; rather the Spirit of Christ gives the believer the power to overcome all things. Jews and Gentiles alike knew they needed saving. 'In Christ' the believer has entered on a new life, expressed in baptism. Sin was a slave master that paid death as his wages but, by contrast, God gives his servants the free gift of eternal life in Christ (6:23). Like a widow, no longer bound to her husband, so the believer is no longer bound to the law. The corrupt nature reacts in a negative way to the law and divides the heart of the believer until the believer takes hold of the victory that is in Christ.

Paul's Jewish background causes him to turn his attention to a discussion of Israel and the unbelief of the Jews (chapters 9-11). Gentile Christians must not lose sight of the fact that the Christian gospel was the fulfilment of all that had been promised to Abraham. God has the right to choose those he wishes. Even though Israel in her self-righteousness has been temporarily set aside, a Jew may receive salvation in the same way as a Gentile by believing in Christ.

In the so-called practical section of the Epistle (chapters 12-15) the effect of these great truths ('the mercies of God') is set out in terms of transformed conduct. Christians have a life to live in this world as well as a faith to hold and a fellowship to enjoy. Paul was pastor as well as preacher. In Romans, as in his other letters, his theological teaching was given not merely for the sake of information, but to build up and encourage the people of God.

3. Issues

Even the most basic understanding of Romans requires a careful consideration of what Paul means by terms such as salvation, sin, justification, law, grace, faith, righteousness, flesh and spirit. Paul glories in the gospel message (1:16) for he knows its power to save and to transform lives. God is able to save anyone who has faith in him – to forgive their sins and restore them to wholeness. Paul gives an exposure of human sinfulness. Men and women clearly need to be made right with God (justified) because all are caught in an evil whirlpool of sin and death. There is a place for deliverance and salvation and a place for condemnation and punishment. It is clear that there is an inseparable relationship between idolatry and immorality. God allows humankind freewill and ‘gives them over’ to their desires and their effects.

Justice demands that those who are found guilty of rebellion against God (sinners) should be punished. Consequently we are all under sentence of death for we have all sinned (3:23). Jesus has provided a way for us to be acquitted by standing in for guilty sinners at the cost of his own life. God will forgive those who come to him in faith on the basis of the death of Christ, as atonement for sin taking the wrath of a righteous God. However, this does not mean that people are saved on account of their faith in Christ, a construction that might encourage the notion that faith makes a contribution and has some merit, but only by the grace of God. A helpful definition of grace is expressed in the acrostic, ‘God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense. Faith takes what God gives but adds nothing to the gift. A helpful definition of faith is expressed in the acrostic, ‘Forsaking All I Trust Him’. Sinners are justified ‘freely’, through the blood of Christ. ‘Justification’ is not simply forgiveness but being declared ‘righteous’. This righteousness in Christ, by grace through faith, is the good news that Paul feels compelled to preach, for the believer has a new standing before God. Jesus, as the head of a new humanity, has made acquittal and life available to all.

In the Old Testament ‘flesh’ is the basic material of human (and animal) life. While Paul uses the word that is translated ‘flesh’ in different ways, an important usage means ‘sinful nature’, indeed in several places the NIV paraphrases the word that way (8:3). This flesh (sinful nature) is subject to sin and death. Sin of any kind is a work of the flesh, a product of the sinful nature. The consequence of living in this way is death (8:13). In the Old Testament, the opposite of ‘flesh’ is ‘spirit’. Paul says that believers in Christ are not ‘in the flesh’ or ‘controlled by the sinful nature’ (8:8) but in the Spirit (8:9) and should produce the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:19, 22). Paul contrasts the inward purification or circumcision of the heart (which was spoken of by the prophets) with the external circumcision of the flesh (2:28-29). Unlike other New Testament writers, Paul makes a distinction between ‘soul’ and ‘spirit’. For Paul, the spirit is that part of the human being that is dead unless it is in a relationship with God. It is the Christian personality of those made alive in Christ by the Spirit of Christ (8:9-10). It is this same Spirit who gives freedom from sin (6:18, 22), gives directive power in the lives of the children of God (8:14-15), intercedes for the people of God (8:34, 26-27), sanctifies believers (8:15b–17) and is the pledge of coming glory (8:22-24).

While Paul uses the word ‘law’ regularly in the letter to the Romans, its meaning varies between law in general (4:15, 5:13), the five books of the law (or the Pentateuch) in the Old Testament (3:21b), the Old Testament as a whole (3:19) and law of God, not limited to the scriptures, but embedded in the consciences of men and women (2:14-15) and also shown through human knowledge of sin (3:20). Law was given for the preservation of the human race, to bring sin to light and lead sinners to call on the grace of God (6:14-15). The law was also given to provide guidance for the believer’s life as the believer lives by the Spirit (8:3-4). After a believer has been justified, right is still right and wrong is still wrong. While ‘living sacrifice’ is an apparent contradiction (12:1), the cost of the cross calls for a response of total commitment in the new life.

4. Application

The letter to the Romans is Paul's greatest letter and takes prime place among the New Testament letters. The importance of the letter was clearly recognised by the early church that placed it first among Paul's writings. The impact of the letter cannot be measured for it has changed the lives of such great men as Augustine, Luther, Bunyan and Wesley, as well as the lives of countless ordinary men and women. As Luther and Wesley have a significant place in the origins of the Methodist movement we take a moment to consider their writings.

In 1513, Martin Luther was an Augustinian monk who had become Professor of Biblical Theology in the University of Wittenberg. Luther was familiar with the words of the Psalmist, 'deliver me in your righteousness' (Psalm 31:1) but found it hard to know how God's righteousness could deliver rather than condemn him. He wrote:

I had greatly longed to understand Paul's letter to the Romans, and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, 'the righteousness of God' (Romans 1:17), because I took it to mean that righteousness whereby God is righteous and acts righteously in punishing the unrighteous ... Night and day I pondered until ... I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby, through grace and sheer mercy, he justifies us by faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before "the righteousness 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 gateway into heaven.

It was 225 years later that John Wesley came to that critical moment in his life which would result in the 'inextinguishable blaze' of revival. His *Journal* for 24 May 1738 records:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for my salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken *my* sins away, even *mine*; and saved me from the law of sin and death.

The doctrine of justification by divine grace through faith needs repeating over and over again. We live in a world where sin is not taken seriously enough. The fall of humanity (mankind) is real and has real consequences, past, present and future. A life of religion or good works will never be adequate to put a guilty sinner in a right standing before God. Indeed, nothing that we can ever do can make us right with God. Into this hopeless situation God has come himself, in the person of Jesus Christ, his Son. The sacrificial death of Jesus Christ appeases God's anger against human wickedness. Jesus Christ is the sacrifice of atonement (3:25) or 'propitiation' (KJV) for our sins. 'God's holiness has been satisfied because Jesus paid the penalty for human guilt. God's love has likewise been satisfied because the death of Christ provides a way by which the sinner may be forgiven' (Gundry). There is nothing that the world more urgently needs to hear. Paul's letter to the Romans is as relevant now as it was to the New Testament church. The New Testament church needed teaching in Christian Doctrine. Over the years, and especially in recent years, ordinary Christians have lost sight of the great doctrines of the Christian Faith, to such an extent that 'doctrine' has almost become a dirty word in some quarters. Together we must redress the balance.