

RIGHT IN ROMANS

Studies in the Epistle of Paul to the Romans

by

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CHAPTER THREE

INTRODUCTION (1:1-17)

A. SALUTATION (1:1-7)

THE INTRODUCTION IN ROMANS is longer than that any other of the Pauline Epistles. And yet every sentence and phrase is so weighty with meaning that we can ill afford to glide over the passage hurriedly, for if we do so, we shall miss a good deal of treasure.

1. The writer (v. 1)

“**Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ . . .**” Paul is ever aware of the fact that he belongs to Christ, that he has been bought and is owned by the Saviour. For us, too, redemption involves surrender. We are the possession of Him who has purchased us. And the keener our consciousness of Jesus' sacrifice for us, the more fully will we yield ourselves to Him as His property, and His alone. Our Saviour becomes our Master in very truth. His will and ours are one.

“**. . . called to be an apostle . . .**” Paul never lost sight of the fact that his was a divine vocation. He had not sought the work for himself, he had been thrust into it by the Lord. This assurance gave tremendous driving power to his service. He was ever impelled by a divine imperative.

Unless Christian workers today are mastered by the conviction that they are under commission from Christ, their labors will be but the firing of blank cartridges. We are bound to fail in our calling, if we forget that our calling is from God and not of man.

“**. . . separated unto . . .**” Separation is here regarded as God's act. Paul had been ordained by the church, but that was not enough: his real ordination was of God. The laying on of hands in any ordination service is but a hollow mockery except God has first laid His hand on the candidate, separating him from the world to His own holy service.

“**. . . the gospel of God.**” What we see in the Gospel governs what we do with the Gospel. The Gospel is not of man, it is of God; it must be embraced as a revelation from God to effect a revolution in life. We shall get far more fruitage from the Gospel when convinced that its rootage is in God and nowhere else.

2. The message (vv. 2-4)

a) It is foretold in the Old Testament (v. 2)

“ . . . **which he promised afore by his prophets in the holy Scriptures . . .**” As Augustine has so succinctly put it, the New Testament is latent, or concealed, in the Old; and the Old Testament is patent, or revealed, in the New. This being so, we ought to read the two Testaments, each in the fuller light shed upon it by the other.

b) It concerns the God-Man (vv. 3, 4)

“ . . . **concerning his Son . . .**” The living Word is the key to the written Word. Unless we know that the central message of the Bible is Jesus Christ we cannot hope to understand it.

“ . . . **who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh . . .**” The Greek word translated “**was born**” denotes transition, change from one state of being to another. It is a clear statement of the Incarnation, the Son of God become man.

“ . . . **declared to be the Son of God with power . . . by the resurrection from the dead . . .**” The rising of Jesus Christ from the dead made it abundantly clear that He was indeed the very Son of God. God wants men to know that Jesus Christ is His eternal and only-begotten Son; and men need desperately to know Him in that relationship.

“ . . . **according to the spirit of holiness . . .**” is a description of Christ ethically, even as the phrase “**according to the flesh**” describes Him physically. Jesus Christ was, and is, holy.

“ . . . **Concerning . . . Jesus Christ our Lord.**” Does He who revealed God master me? Do I make the Lord my Lord in each and every experience of life?

3. The mission (v. 5)

“**By whom we have received grace and apostleship . . .**” The mission of the apostle was to proclaim the Gospel to the Gentiles at large. There is rich significance in the connection between these two words “**grace**” and “**apostleship.**”

Paul knew that his apostleship was his one and only work in life, and that he could not hope to fulfill that mission apart from the ever-available grace of God. And not only so, but he felt that the very possession of this grace constituted in itself a summons to service. All this has an intimate bearing upon our own lives. Talents involve labor. Gifts are calls. Blessings entail duties. The treasure that we have in Jesus means service for Jesus. Springs of inspiration are to overflow in streams of dedication. We are bound to live for Him who lives in us, whether or not we have been called into full-time Christian service. Regardless of the work whereby we earn our daily bread, our real calling as Christians is to live so as to glorify our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

“... **for obedience to the faith** . . .” What is meant by this phrase? Nothing less than the obedience which faith inspires. Works are at once the proof and the fruit of faith. If we believe in Jesus with all our hearts, we have to obey Him; we cannot do otherwise. The way to bear more fruit for Christ is to have more faith in Him. Faith gives strength to see and to do.

“... **among all nations, for his name.**” The more complete our knowledge of Jesus is experimentally, the more potent will His name prove to be as a motive for Christian work, and for the support of missions at home and abroad. The revelation of God in Christ should result in dedication to God through Christ. Widened vision bears fruit in strengthened service.

4. The readers (vv. 6, 7)

“**Among whom are ye also** . . .” Paul here reminds his readers that they, too, have been made the recipients of the blessings of the Gospel. They were a branch of the Church of Christ which was rapidly spreading throughout the known world.

Local churches need to be brought to see their vital connection with the Church as a whole. And yet there are churches that do not believe in missions. Where would the churches in our own country be if missionaries had never brought to our distant progenitors a saving knowledge of Christ? Churches born of missions with a scorn for missions—what an anomaly!

“... **called to Jesus Christ** . . .” The apostle would not have his readers unmindful of the fact that they have been called to be the peculiar property of the One who redeemed them. We are Christ's and Christ is ours. Jesus is precious to us, and—we are precious to Jesus. Each one of us who owns His name should be able to pray from the bottom of his heart, “O Jesus, Thou art mine, and I am Thine, forever and forever.”

“... **to all that be in Rome, beloved of God** . . .” Rome was by no means a heavenly city. It was a sink of iniquity. Wickedness abounded. And yet, Paul calls to the attention of his readers, living as they did in an exceedingly pagan and sinful environment, you are the objects of God's infinite love, “**called to be saints,**” that is to say, God's own personal and priceless possession.

The night of sin has settled heavily upon our generation. If we be in Christ and Christ be in us, we can shine, and we must shine for Him like the stars, no matter how great the outer gloom may be.

“... **called to be saints** . . .” The source of the love governs the goal of the call. Because God loves us, He calls us to be His and to be like Him. Election means possession for God's own purposes. A visualization of our calling aids in the realization of our calling. We need to see what we are called to as well as what we are saved from. “**Saints**” is a term descriptive of position in Christ, not necessarily of attainment in grace. Nevertheless, we should seek to become experimentally what we are positionally. And the best way to achieve saintliness of character is to realize the high and holy ties that unite us with Christ. We are to look not inward at self but upward to Christ. To recognize Christ's ownership is to experience Christ's craftsmanship. We need to live very close to Jesus. We must be held tight to be made right.

“ . . . **Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ . . .**” Even a casual reading of Paul's letters will disclose how habitually he links the name of Christ with that of God the Father on a plane of equality. The apostle's belief in the deity of our Lord can be incontestably established from a reading of no more than the salutation in his letters.

“**Grace . . . peace.**” The source and sum of our blessings as Christians is peace rooted in grace.

We cannot know the peace of God apart from the grace of God. Acceptance of His grace in Christ is the one and only way whereby we can have peace with God and consequently know the peace of God which passeth all understanding. As the atmosphere of the earth is necessary to the diffusion of the light and warmth of the sun for the benefit of mankind, so it is only as we are in Christ that we can experience the grace and peace of God made manifest and available in Him.

B. PAUL'S PURPOSE TO VISIT ROME (1:8-15)

1. The church in Rome, a radiating center for the faith (v. 8)

“**First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all . . .**” Such expressions of gratitude to God for the spiritual progress and fruitfulness of believers is very characteristic of the great apostle. If the churches he planted or had peculiar interest in for one reason or another were prospering in grace, it mattered not what he himself might be called upon to undergo in the way of opposition, danger, and sacrifice. Do we have as much of that spirit as we should?

“ . . . **that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world.**” Rome was the capital city of the Empire, and so the church in that center would, other things being equal, have a wide influence for good or ill by virtue of its strategic position. The greater the prominence of a church, the heavier is the obligation resting upon it to see that its light of witness be undimmed by any removable flaw or weakness.

How many churches covet fame for purity in faith and love as feverishly as they seek more worldly kinds of distinction?

2. Paul's yearning to visit Rome (vv. 9, 10)

“**For God is my witness . . .**” It is not uncommon with Paul to call upon God to witness the integrity of his purpose, the sincerity of his motives. He kept his heart open to his Maker, flooded with the sunlight of truth. How well can our inner life stand up under such scrutiny? The world sees the flowing of the stream, the Lord beholds the feeding of the springs. Outward fruitfulness for the Lord is conditioned by inward faithfulness to the Lord.

“ . . . **whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son . . .**” “**with my spirit**” refers to the organ or instrument of service; “**in the gospel of his Son**” is the sphere of service. Our souls are Christ's tools, the instruments upon which He plays and through which He makes His message known. What sort of care do we take of them? Costly tools must not be exposed to rust and ruin. The musician guards his precious instrument against all possible damage.

Do we appreciate the fact that our souls are so priceless and invaluable in the work of Christ that only He Himself can preserve them from loss and injury? Furthermore, let us not neglect the cultivation of our inner life in our zeal for outward service. God must build in us to build with us. Our sphere of service **“in the gospel of his Son”** should guide us in the care of the spirit. We shall forfeit many a precious opportunity to serve our Lord if we are careless about being kept in His hand.

“ . . . without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers.” The apostle devoted many a long hour to intercessory prayer. How faithful are we in this sacred privilege and obligation? God judges us by how we pray as well as by what we do. What we ask of God for our fellow Christians has a great deal of effect upon what we see in them and do for them.

The effectiveness of our witnessing to the unsaved depends greatly upon the intensity of our prayers in their behalf. Neglect of intercessory prayer, like a protracted drought, is retarding the progress of Christ's kingdom.

“Always in my prayers making request if by any means now at length I might have a prosperous journey by the will of God to come unto you.” Paul's way lay in God's will.

Through much arduous and painful discipline he had come to learn the value and necessity of absolute reliance upon divine leading. Disappointments that make us rest upon His appointments are blessings in disguise. Are we as concerned about what God wants to do through us as we are in what we want God to do for us? As with the strange combinations of circumstances that finally brought to full fruition Paul's dreams of visiting Rome, so God sometimes brings us to blessed goals by way of bewildering and arduous detours.

3. Reasons for Paul's longing to visit Rome (vv. 11-15)

In verses 11 to 15 we find Paul giving three reasons why he yearns to visit the church in Rome. And these three reasons throw an interesting sidelight upon his personality.

a) That the apostle and the Church may be mutually blessed (vv. 11-13)

“For I long to see you that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established . . .” Like an artist whose love of beauty is an incessant urge for him to reproduce in concrete media the visions of loveliness that fill his own soul, so Paul's love for Christ made him want ever to bring the graces of the Spirit into fuller bloom in the lives of all with whom he came into contact. How ardently do we yearn to grow into the likeness of Jesus? What we really want to give of Christ to others is contingent upon what we let Christ do for us. To impart we must first possess. It is only out of a wealthy fellowship with Christ which is a living reality at the very center of our being that we can assist and inspire others to grow in Him.

“ . . . That is, that I may be comforted together with you.” Observe the exquisite delicacy of the apostle. He does not want these Christians to think he is writing from a pedestal. “I may have something to give to you,” he says in effect, “but you have it in you to make a real contribution to my own heart and life.”

Is there not in this much that is richly suggestive? We can bestow far more upon other people in the way of moral and spiritual benefits when we are quick to perceive what we in turn may receive from them of inspiration and guidance in the higher life. Such receptivity will multiply our productivity in influence.

We must be keen to discern all available fountains of inspiration, ever on the alert to increase our spiritual capital. An attitude of superiority that refuses to learn from fellow Christians will go far toward crippling our influence for God. We need to pray to be kept humbly appreciative as well as fervently aggressive.

b) That he might gather fruit from the church (v. 13)

“Now I would not have you ignorant, brethren, that oftentimes I purposed to come unto you (and was let [hindered] hitherto) . . .” While we do not know definitely what hindrances Paul may have had in mind, the probability is that *the obstacle was evangelistic work elsewhere.*

Paul's labors were ever subject to the Spirit's guidance. More than once his well-laid plans were upset by divine interference, or, perhaps we had better say, overruling providence. We who live for Christ must be seen to be led of Christ. This, it might be mentioned, was one secret of Martin Luther's mighty hold upon the people of Germany in the Protestant Reformation. Men trusted him because it was so evident that he was seeking to follow step by step in the path that God was marking out for him. Those of us who are privileged to be spiritual leaders of others, must show in our whole bearing that all of our living and serving is under divine supervision.

“. . . that I might have some fruit among you also, even as among other [in the rest of the] Gentiles.” Paul had fruit because he prayed and planned and worked. Fruitlessness may often be charged to aimlessness and shiftlessness. There is no such thing in the spiritual realm as a spontaneous generation of harvests. The fruit we reap comes from the seed we plant and cultivate under God. Toiling goes before reaping.

Now this fruit may mean one or the other of two things, or possibly both. It may have reference to an increased number of converts or else to growth in grace and knowledge on the part of those who have already accepted Christ.

We rather think the apostle has both considerations in view. If so, he is sounding a much needed note for our modern church. Neither the extensive nor the intensive work of the church must be sacrificed, the one to the other. The fires of evangelism must never be allowed to die down. There must be no resting on our laurels while strategic positions remain to be won for our Lord.

Feeding the saints must not take the place of seeking the lost. Nor on the other hand, must we allow the evangelization of the lost to make us unmindful of the edification of the saved.

Christians who fail to grow in Christ will lose out in their ability to win souls for Christ. The enrichment of the members of the church must keep pace with the expansion of the numbers on the roll.

c) That he might make partial payment of his indebtedness to the world (vv. 14-15)

“I am debtor both to Greeks and to the Barbarians, both to the wise and to the unwise [foolish].” This would mean practically the whole known world in Paul's time. The Greeks and Romans regarded all the rest of mankind as barbarians. The former were wise, all others were foolish. And who would venture to say that every vestige of racial pride has perished from the earth? There is all too much of it today nourishing the roots of bitterness and fomenting strife and tragic divisions, even within the Church.

We do well to emulate the apostle in his tender sense of indebtedness. Which in our thinking is the major consideration—what the world owes us, or what we owe the world? Forgetting the debts we owe is far more impoverishing than neglect of the debts owed us. Fulfillment of our duties adds far more to our wealth than insistence on our rights. Pride that ignores its receipts from outside sources is a deadly drain upon the capital of the spirit. Our discernment of debt governs our enrichment in grace.

We are no more affluent spiritually than the indebtedness we acknowledge. Our privileges yield us revenue only in so far as we convert them into obligations. Not until we feel and know that our privileges in Christ constitute an inescapable responsibility to serve Him with all we are and have will the fabulous treasures that God has for us in Jesus enrich our souls as they can and should.

In the spiritual realm, if not in the material, we keep what we give and lose what we keep.

“So, as much as in me is, I am ready . . .” Paul was willing, yes, but he realized that apart from God's help all of his willingness was of no avail. Do we take honest stock of the resources at our command for the fulfillment of our duties, or do we neglect faithful introspection in order to evade our responsibilities? The duties that God requires of us insure supplies from God. He does not send his workmen to their tasks without the necessary tools and resources. But the trouble is, we do not seek and take what God has for us to use in his service.

“. . . I am ready to preach the gospel to you also that are at Rome.” Rome—the mighty capital of the empire; Rome— where wealth and pride and education abounded; Rome—where the forces of sin held high carnival; Rome— where skepticism was rampant, and genuine piety was laughed out of court. Rome! Well might Paul, from a human standpoint, have quavered at the prospect of carrying the pure and simple Gospel to this proud and mighty city.

We are often called upon to serve Jesus Christ in places of exceedingly great difficulty where the atmosphere is hostile to the last degree and the situation seems absolutely impenetrable. We are tempted to lose heart and side-step. We are intimidated rather than invigorated by strategic opportunities to witness for Jesus under fire. We must not let the pride that towers in the world freeze the grace that flowers in the soul. We forget that Christ transcends every Rome, that He is greater than all the pride and all the might in the world. If we truly believe that Christ is all-powerful, we will go with the Gospel wherever He sends us. We will not be afraid even to go to Rome for Him.

C. THESIS OF THE EPISTLE (1:16, 17)

In verses 16 and 17 of this first chapter we come to the thesis of the Epistle—a clear and strong statement of the great doctrine which is to be established by such irrefutable logic in the succeeding chapters. And what is this doctrine? It is the great doctrine of justification by faith, or, to put it another way, the doctrine of salvation by grace. It was the prayerful reading of these two verses, it may be of interest to recall, that brought Martin Luther out into the full light of a saving faith in Christ.

1. The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation (v. 16)

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel . . .” Paul was proud of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He gloried in the cross. He made his boast in the atonement wrought on Calvary. Never did he hesitate to bear witness to what he had experienced of the saving and keeping power of Jesus.

May it not be that many people are ashamed of the Gospel because they pay more heed to what the world says of it than to what the Lord does with it?

“ . . . for it is the power of God unto salvation . . .” The Gospel is like the forces of nature in that we have to test it to know its power. If we want to understand the strength afforded by the grace of God, we must launch out upon it. Is it not highly significant that those who make the most use of the Gospel have the least doubt of its efficacy to meet all the moral and spiritual needs of men? In view of the multiplying miracles wrought in the lives of men through its agency, it is as unscientific, to say the least, to question the potency of the Gospel as it would be to deny the amazing marvels of electricity in our day.

“ . . . to every one that believeth . . .” Electric appliances must be rightly connected before they will work. Just so, we must believe in the Gospel to receive power from the Gospel. Unbelief is a nonconductor of spiritual energy. Faith wires the soul for grace.

“ . . . to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.” By the Greeks is meant the whole non-Jewish world. The term is virtually equivalent to Gentile. Neither the religious privileges, enjoyed by the Jews, nor the cultural, political and other advantages possessed by people of other races afforded ground for exemption from the need of redeeming grace.

The salvation which God has provided for all must be accepted by all, Jew and Gentile alike.

Mankind is one in its need of what God in Christ alone can do for men and women of every time, place, class and race. Yet how many Christians are indifferent to the Great Commission to carry the Gospel into all the world, or light-heartedly evade the duty of obedience by maintaining that Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and so forth, is good enough for the adherents of these respective faiths.

2. Justification by faith (v. 17)

“For therein is revealed a righteousness of God from faith unto faith, as it is written, But the righteous shall live by faith.”

Here we have the thesis of the Epistle in a nutshell, namely, that men are saved by believing in the Christ who is the full and perfect revelation of God as holy love. Faith appropriates the righteousness that is in Him. This great truth receives fuller treatment further along in the Epistle. Here we simply state it and pass on.

~ end of chapter 3 ~

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