

ROMANS

(1)

Chapter 1

Besides the Book of Revelation, St. Paul's Letter to the Romans is one of the more difficult books in Sacred Scripture to understand. St. Peter himself writes, **"So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction"** (2 Peter 3:15-16).

Written at least ten years before any of the Gospels (A.D. 54-58), the Letter to the Romans begins with one word, *Paul*. In the first century it was common to begin a letter by first identifying yourself. Paul goes on to refer to himself as a **"servant"** or a **"slave of Jesus Christ"** (1:1). A *doulos* (Greek, "slave") is someone who has been purchased, and once purchased becomes the master's possession. In effect, Paul is describing the proper status of all Christians: **"You are not your own; you were bought with a price"** (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

Paul continues, writing that he is **"... not ashamed of the gospel of Christ"** (1:16). "Gospel" or *euangelion* means "good message" or "good news." When soldiers went to war, those at home would wait anxiously for a report from marathon runners who periodically ran back with news from the front (Isaiah 52:7). Watchmen in towers were trained to tell by the way the runners' legs were churning whether the news was good or bad. If the runner was doing the "survival shuffle," this meant a grim report; but if his legs were flying in a whirl of dust, this meant good news.



"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth" (1:18). Every human being at least innately knows God; thus all who reject that "natural" knowledge are liable to judgment. In human history man often suppressed the truth about God by "pressing" it down, forcing it into the subconscious so that it can be more easily ignored. Yet Paul teaches that the truth is always there, pushing back up.

Paul writes of the truth because God himself is the Teacher. The Greek *agnosia* (Latin, "ignoramus") means "without knowledge." Whereas the atheist boldly declares that there is no God, the agnostic says, *"I don't know if there is a God. I am without sufficient knowledge to know one way or the other."* Such a position risks God's wrath because it denies that God has in fact revealed Himself, and to the point that one can even blame God for lack of evidence that he exists.

"... they became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened" (1:21). A fool is wicked because he denies what he knows to be true; and in this sense Paul writes that God gave men and women the logical consequences of their arrogance. **"For this reason, God gave them up to vile passions"** (1:24-27); that is, gave them up to sins not simply against culture or societal convention but against the created person.

Chapter 2

"... for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself; for you, the judge, are doing the very same things" (2:1). Paul chastises the Jews who think they are better than the Gentiles. While the Jews have received unique privileges from God, this only makes the Chosen People even more responsible when they sin. And lest the Gentiles think they are exempt because they were not expressly given the law of Moses (Torah), their sin brings its own condemnation (**"For God shows**

no partiality.” 2:11). God’s law has been given to every human being—the “**law written in their hearts, their conscience**”—so every person is held accountable before the Creator (2:15-16). Paul insists the natural law or conscience is a true moral authority that implies recognition of the law. As such, the Gentile is no less virtuous than the Jew when he simply follows his conscience but does not know the law.

“**. . . for circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. . . .**” (2:25). Paul does not deny the value of circumcision as a ritual that signifies God consecrating—cutting—Israel away from the mass of nations for Himself. However, circumcision is an outward sign only. As the natural law written on the Gentile’s heart is indicative of his relationship to God, so does circumcision serve as an outward pledge that one belongs to the People of God and to God Himself, and therefore acts accordingly.

Chapter 3

Paul anticipates the Jews who object to being included with Gentiles regarding sin. So Paul asks the question himself: “**What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew**” (3:1)? That is, if the law and circumcision mean nothing because we are all sinners, what advantage does a member of the Chosen People have? In fact, if sin prompts God’s mercy, then would not God be unjust to inflict his wrath upon Israel’s infidelity? Paul says, “**By no means**” (3:6)! All people are justly condemned for their sin, because the law cannot pardon sin.

But then how can people be pardoned? The answer lies in verses 21-31. Paul says God’s saving justice is not through the law but through faith in Jesus. This is a radical departure for the Jews who learned that to possess the law is to be *exempt* from judgment. However, Paul is teaching that God requires the law’s *fulfillment*. That is, the law that stipulates circumcision is of value only if it represents the heart’s “circumcision”—that “cutting” out of sin from our lives—not just obedience to the law.

This is key because Paul is in fact placing the Jews on the same level as the Gentiles. Of course, the Jews protest because, as Jesus Himself admits in John 4:22, “**Salvation is of the Jews.**” True, but this does not mean the Jews are exempt from judgment.

Before the law human beings sinned, but their ignorance was not recognized formally as transgression (4:15; 5:13). In fact, the Lord declares all people are sinners. The Jews, to whom the law of Moses is addressed, are just as much subject to God’s wrath as are the Gentiles. Now with Jesus a new era is inaugurated in which divine righteousness supersedes the law; and for which the Old Testament was a privileged time of preparation (Romans 1:2; Galatians 3:23-25).

“**. . . all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith**” (3:22-25). “Expiation” removes the sin which has come between God and man. For example, once a year the high priest entered the Temple’s Holy of Holies to offer sacrifice in atonement for Israel’s sins. There the high priest sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice on the golden slab covering the Ark of the Covenant, which contained the Ten Commandments—the law that Israel repeatedly violated. The sacrificial blood upon the “mercy seat” symbolically came *between* the violated law and the violators, but it did not remove the sin. Only Christ’s Blood removed the sin that came between God and man.

At the end of chapter three, Paul answers another anticipated question: does justification through faith in Christ nullify the law? Paul answers no; in fact, it invokes the law. Paul is saying that justification, which occurs when one believes and is baptized, is always gratuitous. A single work of obedience to God’s law does not give us a claim on the grace we receive at that moment. Yet the conditions of our first justification (baptism) must be distinguished from the conditions of

our final justification, which requires Christians to be “doers of the law”—that is, those who live the moral commandments of Christ (2:13).

Chapter 4

Abraham’s acceptance of the word of Yahweh required him to hope in a promise that no mere human could guarantee (Genesis 12:4; Romans 4:18). Thus, God credited Abraham with righteousness when he put his faith in Yahweh, even though he was as uncircumcised as any Gentile (Abraham is circumcised in Genesis 17). Jews must then follow the example of Abraham as the model of faith if they want to be counted among his descendants (Galatians 3:17).

In this way Paul asserts the primacy of faith, and rejects the notion that Abraham’s righteousness is *only* “**because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws**” (Genesis 26:5). For the Jews held that Abraham somehow observed the law *before* Moses received the Ten Commandments. Paul writes: “**That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants—not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham . . .**” (4:16). In other words, if salvation were gained only by keeping the law, only the Jews could be saved because the Gentiles were not given the law. But Abraham became the spiritual father of both Jew and Gentile, and so both are saved exactly as he was—by faith.

Chapter 5

“**For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life**” (5:10). “Reconciliation” is the return of the alienated sinner to friendship with God. Once reconciled, the Christian experiences peace and the confident hope of salvation; and this despite the “**hardships**” that might tend to separate human beings from Christ’s love (1 Corinthians 4:11-13).

“**Sin is not counted where there is no law**” (5:13). It is not that sin did not exist before the law of Moses, but that a specific breaking of the commandments as given by Yahweh was not counted against a specific people before they received the law. However, after Moses and the Ten Commandments, there were not only sins committed against the natural law as a result of Original Sin, but also personal sins because the law had since been given. Paul explains that while the law awakens us to sin, it was later turned into an occasion of sin by the Jews with the myriad additional laws that governed everyday life. Again, the Gentiles, who did not have the law but knew right from wrong through nature, could also commit sin. As Abraham received God’s promise before he was circumcised, the circumcision of the Jew who does not obey God’s commandments becomes uncircumcision; and for the Gentile who does what is good, his uncircumcision becomes circumcision—an interior “mark” of true faithfulness.

Chapter 6

Paul takes the Christian experience a step further in his brief theology of baptism, the longest treatment of the topic in all his letters. With baptism the Christian is joined to Christ’s suffering and dying. Paul’s phrase is bold; the Christian is not merely identified with the “dying Christ” who has won victory over sin, but is “**dead to sin**” (6:11).

Therefore, the baptismal rite symbolically represents the death, burial, and Resurrection of Christ. The convert descends into the baptismal bath, is covered with its waters, and emerges to a new life. Now the Christian lives in union with the risen Christ, a union that is fulfilled when the Christian will one day “**be with Christ**” in glory (6:4). Christians have died to sin and have nothing more to do with it because Christ lives in them. One is not removed from the world, but the grace of baptism helps one to live as one dedicated to God.

Chapter 7

Paul asks that if God's intention was always to re-create humanity, what was the point of God giving Israel the law? The point was to give Israel the means by which she would love God, just as Adam and Eve were given the opportunity to love God in the Garden of Eden through their obedience to the commandment not to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (Genesis 2:16-17). The issue was not the law itself but man's lack of love for the Father. Therefore in our place Christ obeys and loves the Father perfectly by his obedience, even unto "death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8).

But Paul knows how intent the Jews are to maintain the law which does not save. So Paul gives the example of a married woman who is obligated to her husband. Should her husband die, she is free to marry another. Similarly, newly baptized converts are set free from the obligations they previously had as Jews under the law, as they are now joined to the Resurrected Lord. They can obey and serve God with their hearts and not merely by their external observances of the law.

All this is very shocking to the Jews, and Paul anticipates their objection in v. 13: "**Did that which is good, then, bring death to me?**" Paul answers his own rhetorical question: "**By no means!**" The problem was that evil had hijacked the human *heart*, which the law could not restore. Indeed, sin twisted the law to create further opportunities for man to disobey. Paul himself felt the anguish of one who desperately wanted to keep the law but repeatedly failed. We do not do the things we know we should do, he writes, and we do the things we know we should not do. Disgusted with this inner conflict, Paul asks, "**Who will deliver me from this body of death**" (7:22- 24)?

Chapter 8

In answer, Paul writes that Jesus has rescued human beings from the enslavement of sin and made it possible for them to live "**according to the Spirit**" and not according to the flesh (8:1-4). The commands of the law are like a magnifying glass, focusing the problem of the human condition in one place, Israel. Now Jesus has paid the price for sin through his death and Resurrection, and has released his Spirit into the entire human family to transform their hearts to love God and neighbor. And God's renewal of human beings is the first step in his larger mission for all creation.

While the law told human beings what to do and what not to do, it gave no power to overcome the inclination to sin. Christ was sent to accomplish what the law could not; for the earthly-minded human being is unable to obey God's law and transcend the inner conflict within himself. Since the purpose of the Son's mission was to condemn all sin, through baptism the Spirit now enables man to overcome the flesh and arrive at the goal the law once proposed. For without the vitality of the Spirit, the human body is like a corpse; but in union with Christ the human spirit lives and influences the will (8:12).

In this gift of the Spirit Christians are children of God, placing them in a special relationship to Christ and to the Father as "**joint heirs with Christ**" (8:14-30). So that what belongs to Christ—and what is true of Christ—belongs to us and becomes true of us also.

And it is not only the Church that is liberated from bondage; the entire creation is awaiting its liberation and resurrection (8:19-25). As we wait for that new creation to be born, the Spirit guides and intercedes for us (8:26-27).

Paul concludes this chapter with a series of rhetorical questions. "**If God is for us, who is against us**" (8:31)? Of course, the answer is, "No one!" Finally, "**Who will separate us from the love of Christ**" (8:35)? As Paul lists tribulation, persecution, peril, and the like—most of which he had personally experienced—again the answer is nothing will separate us from "**the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord**" (8:39).