

THE MESSAGE OF ROMANS

by Ray C. Stedman

The Epistle of Paul to the Romans is undoubtedly the most powerful human document that has ever been written. It is pure gold from beginning to end. This is the book that lit the fire in Martin Luther's heart and brought about the Protestant Reformation, changing the history of Europe, as well as the world. This is the book that struck home as John Wesley sat in a little chapel in London listening to Luther's Prelude to the Epistle to the Romans. Wesley said his heart was strangely warmed as he heard the truths of Romans set forth. There followed, through him, the great evangelical awakening that saved England from the fate of France and arrested the decay of English life, completely altering the history of the world again.

This is the epistle that burned in the heart of Karl Barth, who in our day set forth some of the mighty truths of this letter and thus captured the theological world, calling it back from the crass, empty liberalism of the nineteenth century, restoring much truth to the churches of Europe. The lives of millions of people who have read the letter to the Romans have been drastically altered.

A church I know of in Montana was once regarded as the most liberal church in the city of Great Falls. The pastor was in Chicago on one occasion, and he went into the Moody Church to see what fundamentalists were saying. He wanted to find something to criticize. He listened to Dr. Ironside teaching the book of Romans, and his heart was captured by that message. Afterward he talked with Dr. Ironside, who gave him a copy of his lectures on Romans. This man read the book on the train back to Montana, and by the time he reached Great Falls, he was a transformed man. He went into his pulpit and began to proclaim the truths of the book of Romans and the church was transformed. I have therefore had the experience of seeing a completely liberal church transformed to an evangelical testimony in the space of a few years by the power of the book of Romans.

Perhaps that will whet our appetites as we come to this great epistle. It was written to the Christians in Rome by the Apostle Paul. He was spending a few months in Corinth before going up to Jerusalem to carry that famous collection of money which had been gathered together by the churches of Asia for the needy saints in Jerusalem.

We do not know how the church in Rome was started -- perhaps by Christians who had been converted at Pentecost and returned to the capital city. Paul was writing to them because he had heard of their faith, and he wanted to fulfill it to the utmost; he wanted them to be soundly based in the truth. Thus this letter constitutes a magnificent explanation of the total message of Christianity. It contains almost every Christian doctrine in some form, and is a panorama of the marvelous plan of God for the redemption of man.

If you had no other book of the Bible than this, you would find every Christian teaching at least mentioned here. This, then, is what we might call the master key to all of the Scriptures. If you really grasp the book of Romans in its total argument you will find yourself at home in any other part of the Scriptures.

In the introduction, found in the first 17 verses, Paul writes to us about Christ, about the Roman Christians and about himself. As in every good introduction, he declares here the major themes of the letter. The letter itself is divided into three major divisions: chapters one through eight, nine through 11, and 12 through 16. These divisions grow naturally out of one another.

As we shall see, the first eight chapters are doctrinal explanations of what God is doing with man; how he redeems the total man -- body, soul and spirit. Chapters nine-eleven illustrate this for us in the nation Israel. And 12-16 is the practical section in which all these mighty truths are applied to human situations. Thus, the book covers all of life. If you will remember that simple outline you will have a key to the book of Romans.

The first major theme is about Christ, because there is no Christianity without him. Christianity is not a creed; it is a life -- a life to be lived again in you. Therefore, you must learn about Christ. That is the theme of the

letter and it is the note with which it begins.

Next, Paul writes about the Roman Christians because they are just like us. In fact, this is the central problem with which Christianity grapples -- human beings like you and me. That is what these Roman Christians were. They are the basic material in which God begins this work. All that is described about them in this letter is true of us, as everything that is true of us was true of them. Third, Paul writes about himself because he is the pattern of what Christ will do; he is "Exhibit A," a living example of God's grace. All this is simply to make visible and clear to us what God intends to do in Christ.

This letter requires a summary treatment. In studying certain books of the Bible I have tried to gather up the main themes, the principle thoughts of the book, in order to get the full force of the message. But this letter moves in such a logical development that the best way to handle it is to trace through the argument, without getting bogged down in details, so that we might see the devastating logic by which the apostle develops his theme. When we are through, we will see how magnificently he has captured all the mighty truths of the Gospel for us.

To begin with, in chapter 1, we have the central affirmation of the letter -- the Gospel:

I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God ... {Rom 1:16a RSV}

Who would be ashamed of the power of God, the greatest force possible in the universe, at work in the gospel? It can change lives; it can lay hold of a drifting, purposeless, lost young man who does not care where he is going and does not know what he is living for and suddenly change his life and give him purpose, drive, and meaning. That is the power of God at work. That is the Gospel.

... it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. {Rom 1:16b RSV}

Paul will show us why as we go along, for in the Gospel,

...the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, He who through faith is righteous shall live. {Rom 1:17b RSV}

This quote is from Habakkuk and is the verse that burned itself into Martin Luther's heart. That is Paul's theme -- the righteousness of God which is revealed in the gospel.

To establish the need for this, Paul looks at the world around him. In the subsequent verses, through chapter two and most of chapter three, he is simply analyzing what mankind is like, taking the two apparent divisions of mankind. Someone has well said, "There are only two classes of people, the righteous and the unrighteous, and the classifying is always done by the righteous." I remember years ago, when my children were very small, stepping out into the backyard one day and finding that someone had drawn a line down the center of a panel of the fence with chalk. One side was headed "Good People" and the other side, "Bad People." Under the heading, "Bad People," were listed the names of my children. On the other side were the neighbor's children. It was quite obvious that the classifying had indeed been done by "the righteous."

The apostle starts with the unrighteous, those whom we would call "The Bad People," and outcasts of society. But first he summarizes both classes in one verse. This is such an important verse that I call your special attention to it (verse 18):

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. {Rom 1:18 RSV}

That says a great deal. It says, for instance, that the problem with men is that they have the truth, but they will not look at it; instead, they suppress it. If you want proof of that, I suggest you look at your own life for a while, and also at the lives of those around you. Is it not true that we push the things we do not like down into our subconscious mind? We do not like to think about them. This is why men keep so busy in the rat-race of

life, never wanting to be alone, never wanting to stop and think, or really look at things, but always attempting to keep busy in a constant whirl of life. Suppression of the truth -- that is the central problem.

Because of this suppression, the wrath of God is continuously pouring itself out upon mankind. That wrath is described for us as this chapter develops. It turns out not to be lightning bolts from heaven, flung at wicked people who step over the traces, but rather God saying to mankind, "Look, I don't want you to do a certain thing because it will destroy you, but if you insist upon doing it, you may, but you will have to accept the consequences. You can't make a choice to live wrongly and still avoid the consequences that come from that choice."

Three times in this chapter the wrath of God is indicated in the repeated phrase. "God gave them up." It results in this condition (verses 29-31):

They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. {Rom 1:29-31 RSV}

That is the condition of the rebellious people who display their enmity towards God and their suppression of the truth of God by flagrantly disobeying him, observing no standard, living as they please, and doing what they like. The result is a moral decay, and a perversion of the natural drives of life. Even the sexual drives become perverted, so that men give themselves to men, and women to women, as this chapter describes. This is exactly what is taking place in society today, wherever man lives in open rebelliousness.

But that is not all of society. In chapter two, the apostle turns to the other side, the "good" side, the "Good People" -- the so called "moral" and "religious" people who are by this time very delightedly pointing the finger at the crowd which is living in open and vile wickedness. Paul says to them, "Wait a minute!" Verse 1:

You have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. {Rom 2:1 RSV}

Then in a most remarkable way, he shows how this is true. He reveals that these people who are saying, "Why, we don't do these things. We don't live like this. We don't smoke. We don't carouse. We don't go in for sexual licentiousness. We observe the laws. We try to behave ourselves," are, nevertheless, equally as guilty as the others.

They, too, are fulfilling certain of the things on the list above, as fully as those who do the more open things. They indulge in such things as malice, strife, deceit, malignity, gossip, slander, and so forth. They, too, are "inventors of evil;" they, too, are "foolish, faithless, heartless, and ruthless." They cover it by an external appearance of being good, but inside, their hearts are as filled with malignity, envy, jealousy, strife and evil against one another as the others.

So there you have the picture of humanity. "Do-your-own-thing" people are on one side, looking at these moral, respectable people, reading their hearts aright and saying, "Look at the hypocrites. I wouldn't touch them with a ten-foot pole." And all the "moral and respectable" people are looking at these others and saying, "Look at that licentious, lascivious crowd. We don't want anything to do with them." But God, turning the spotlight of his omniscient eye on humanity, says, "You are all equally guilty." There is no difference.

Then the Jew comes in and says, "What about me? After all, I am a Jew and have certain advantages before God." Paul examines this claim and shows that the Jew is in exactly the same boat as the others. Despite his advantages; he is filled with the same kind of heart-enmity as the others. So Paul's conclusion is that mankind stands, without exception, in need of a Redeemer.

Now, that prepares the way for the gospel. When man sees this, the conclusion is found in this well-known passage (chapter 3, verses 19-20):

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. {Rom 3:19-20 RSV}

And then, in verse 23:

... since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. {Rom 3:23 RSV}

As Phillips so beautifully renders that last clause, "everyone falls short of the beauty of God's plan" {Rom 3:23b J.B.Phillips}. That lays the basis for redemption.

There are three phases of redemption, as Paul outlines them for us. These are familiar to you: justification, sanctification, and glorification. Chapter four illustrates the meaning of justification. Paul begins this theme in the closing part of chapter three, where he shows us that justification means that God gives us a righteous standing before him on the basis of the work of Christ. Another has died in our place. Another has met our need. We could never do it ourselves, for we are totally incapable of pleasing God apart from this change that occurs in the heart.

It makes no difference whether we build a moral, respectable life outwardly or kick over the traces and live like a bohemian or a hippie. Both are guilty; neither is accepted; neither is any better than the other. Therefore, the only way righteousness can come to us is by accepting the gift of God in Jesus Christ. That is justification. It has to do with the spirit of man. Each of us is a three-fold being; we have spirit, soul, and body. It is God's program to save the whole man, and in the next series of chapters Paul tells us how God does it.

He begins with the spirit, the deepest part of man. What God does in the spirit is to implant his Holy Spirit there. That gives us righteousness, a righteous standing before God. Justification is therefore a permanent, unchangeable thing. It is far more than forgiveness of sin, although it includes that; it is a position before God as though we never had sinned at all. It is Christ's righteousness imputed to us, reckoned to our account. When this takes place we are delivered from the penalty for sin.

Paul illustrates this in chapter four with Abraham and David, who were both justified on this basis, and not by circumcision or by obeying the law or by any of the things that men do to please God. No religious hocus-pocus, no attempt to obey an unreachable standard, would be adequate in God's sight. It was to be simply by faith; these men believed God about his Son.

Abraham looked forward and saw the coming of Christ and believed God and he was justified by faith. David, although he was guilty of the twin sins of adultery and murder, believed God and was justified, so that he could sing about the man "to whom God would not impute iniquity." Thus, these men are examples from the Old Testament of how God justifies.

Unfortunately, many Christians stop right there. They think that is all salvation is about -- a way to escape hell and get to heaven. But there is more to the human life than the spirit; there is also the soul and the body. Beginning in chapter five, Paul sets forth for us the way God works to deliver the soul. That consists of our mind, our emotions, and our will.

The soul of man, as he is born of Adam, is under the reign of sin. The flesh (if you want to use the Biblical term for it) rules us. The life of Adam possesses us, with all its self-centered characteristics. Even though our spirit has been justified it is quite possible to go on with the soul still under the bondage and reign of sin. So, though our destiny is settled in Christ, our experience is still as much under the control of evil as before we were Christians. That is the cause of the miserable experience of being up-and-down, sometimes reckoning on the promises of God for justification, then experiencing again the implacable bondage of sin ruling in the life, causing selfishness and self centeredness.

Well, what is God's program for this? To sum it up in one word: sanctification. God intends us to see that in Jesus Christ this whole thing has been taken care of, even as our destiny was, so that we can be as free from

the reign of sin as we are from the penalty of sin.

In chapter five Paul outlines the whole program for us. He takes these two really basic divisions of mankind, man in Adam and man in Christ, puts them side-by-side and says, "Look, when you were a man in Adam (that is, before you became a Christian) you acted on the basis of the life that you had inherited from Adam. You did things naturally, and what you did naturally was wrong, it was self-centered. You didn't have to plan it, or to program it.

"You didn't have to get up in the morning and think about how to be bad, did you? You didn't catch yourself making resolutions never to be good again, and then suddenly find yourself breaking your word, and being good again when you really didn't intend to. No. You simply expressed the life that was in you, the life of Adam. You learned how from babyhood and it was so widespread around you that it seemed perfectly natural."

But now, Paul says, when you become a Christian, God does something to that old life. He cuts you off from this life in Adam. You are no longer joined to fallen Adam, but you are joined to a risen Christ, and your life is now linked with him. He plans now to express his life through you in the same natural way as Adam once expressed his life through you.

What you experienced of defeat, misery, heartache, bondage and blindness in Adam will be exceeded much more by what you will experience of victory, glory, blessing, peace and joy in Christ. When you learn the process, it is as easy to be good in Christ as it was to be bad in Adam. It is just as natural, and done without struggle. But it will take a while for you to learn to put it into practice. You will do feebly at first and you will struggle with it. Perhaps it will take you quite a while to really see what Paul is talking about, but when you do, you will discover that where once sin reigned over you unto death, Christ is now reigning over you unto life. Right now, in this life, you can experience victory in Christ where once you experienced only defeat in Adam.

Chapter six begins to show us how. Here Paul declares that God, through the death of Jesus, not only died for us, but we also died with him. That is a great truth. When God says he set us free from the life of Adam and linked us to the life of Christ, he really did. Through for quite a long time our feelings will tell us differently, God wants us to understand this. We are to believe it regardless of how we feel, because what he says is true. If we will believe it, despite our feelings, we will soon discover that it is true. More and more we shall enter into the realization of this tremendous thing -- that we can be good in Christ as easily as we were bad in Adam.

He begins, then, by announcing the fact, and then says that we must learn to reckon on this. Day by day, as you come into situations of pressure and temptation, you must remind yourself that what God says is true and act on it, even though you do not feel like it. You will not feel dead with Christ; you will feel as if this evil within is very much alive, and that it has control over you, that you must do wrong things. You will feel unsatisfied if you do not, afraid that you will not find what you are looking for in life, or that you will miss out on what the world around you is experiencing.

These are the pressures that will come upon you, but whom are you going to believe? The One who loves you? Will you reckon that what he says is true and act on that basis? If you do, you will soon discover that it is true, and you will be brought right out into liberty.

Chapter seven faces the fact that there are two levels of understanding and experiences in this matter. We know already, even before we become Christians, that certain aspects of our natural life -- the Adamic life, the flesh -- are bad because they get us into trouble. We know that selfishness is bad. We know that sexual misadventure is bad. We know that stealing and lying are bad. We think that we understand what the flesh is, and what God means when he talks to us about these bad things in our lives. At first, this is the level on which we respond. We stop lying and stealing and doing other outward things.

Then we discover that something strange is happening; despite the fact that we have learned how to walk in victory over the things we have labeled bad, we are still in bondage. We still do not have the power we are looking for in our Christian experience. Thus we enter into the experience that Paul describes in chapter seven.

There he speaks of an inner conflict in which he wrestles with himself. What is wrong? What we have not learned yet is that there is what we might call a "good" side of flesh which is really as bad as the "bad" side. Self effort -- the effort we make to try to do something for God, or to gain some kind of flavor or pleasure or advancement for ourselves by the things we do for God -- these are just as bad as the "bad" things.

When we finally learn that there is nothing we can do for God, but that he intends to do everything through us, then we come into deliverance. That is when we begin fully to realize the experience of mind, emotion, and will brought under the control of Jesus Christ and the fulfilling in glorious, triumphant power all that he has in mind for us. That is the sanctifying of the soul.

But now what about the body? Chapter eight deals with that. Here Paul shows us that while we are still in this life the body remains unredeemed, but the fact that the spirit has been justified and the soul is being sanctified is a guarantee that God will one day redeem (glorify) the body as well. When we enter at last into the presence of Christ, we shall stand -- body, soul, and spirit -- perfect before him. That line of thought erupts into a great, tremendous paean of praise at the close of this chapter.

In chapters nine through eleven some of the questions that have inevitably been raised by any thinking mind which has followed through this great plan of redemption are answered. First, there is the question of the sovereignty of God which is magnificently treated in chapter nine. God is a sovereign being, and his sovereignty answers the question of why I am part of Christ's body and not someone else.

The whole matter of election and the predestinating choice of God helps us to see this whole problem as it really is. We tend to think of ourselves as in a neutral condition before God, and depending upon how we live or act, or what choices we make, we will either fall off on the side of being lost or go on to be saved. But this is not the case.

This chapter shows us that the whole race is already lost, lost in Adam; we were born into a lost race. We lost our right to be saved in Adam, when he sinned, and we have no rights before God at all. Therefore, it is only God's grace that saves any of us. No one has any right to complain to God if some are saved, when none have any right to be saved. Thus, he sets before us in a most powerful way the sovereign power and choice of God.

In chapter ten he links the sovereignty of God with the moral responsibility and freedom of man. He shows us that salvation is a choice of faith. You need not climb up into heaven to bring Christ down, or go down into the grave to bring him up from the dead. In other words, if you were planning to work your way into heaven, this is what you would have to do. You would have to climb into heaven and bring Christ down to earth, and then after he had been here a while and died, you would have to go down into the grave, make him alive and bring him up -- all by your works. How are you going to do that? Well, you cannot, and furthermore, you do not have to. The word is already in your mouth that Jesus is Lord; only believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, and you will be saved.

In chapter eleven he shows us that even as God set aside Israel for a time, in order that grace might do its work among the Gentiles, so God has completely set aside the flesh, the fallen nature, what we are by human nature, so that we might learn what God will do for and through us. When we freely admit, in practice, that without Christ we can do nothing, then we shall learn that we can do all things through him who strengthens us. Faith is the process of this, and it will never be any different. No matter how long we live as Christians, we will ourselves never become any better or any more able to serve Christ, apart from simple dependence upon him. It is always and only Christ working in us which accomplishes the Father's will.

Pride, therefore, is our greatest temptation and our cruelest enemy. Some day even our flesh will serve God by his grace. In the day when creation is freed from its bondage to sin and the sons of God stand forth in resurrection bodies, then even that which was once rejected and cursed shall be made to fulfill the promises and demonstrate the power of God. This is all illustrated by God's treatment of Israel. And that leads us to the doxology at the close of chapter 11, verse 33:

O, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! {Rom 11:33 RSV}

The final section, chapters 12 through 16, covers the practical application of these truths in life. I will call attention to only one or two things. First, in chapter 12, verse 1, he begins,

I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, [justification, sanctification, glorification] to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship [or reasonable service]. {Rom 12:1 RSV}

In other words, the most reasonable, intelligent, thoughtful, purposeful thing you can do with your life, in view of all these great facts that Paul has declared to you, is to give yourself to God and to live for him. Nothing else can fulfill you to any degree. Therefore, give yourself to him. It is the reasonable thing to do.

When you do, you will find your life being changed in all your relationships. First, it is changed with regard to your brethren, as the latter part of chapter twelve shows. Presenting your body will affect your life in the church. Then, in the latter part of chapter twelve and in chapter thirteen, he says it will affect your relationship to the governing powers, to mankind in general, and to all society. Even your inner attitudes will be different, as discussed in chapter fourteen. Your attitudes toward the weak will be entirely opposite to what it was before you were a Christian. And your attitude toward the lost (chapter fifteen) will be entirely different. There will be a burning passion to reach them, for a quite different reason than you ever could have had before.

Paul's closing words are wonderful (chapter 16, verses 25-27):

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith -- to the only wise God be glory evermore through Jesus Christ. {Rom 16:25-27}

Prayer:

Our Father, teach us these mighty truths. Teach us to give ourselves to them that we might learn them understand them and put them into practice in our own lives might fulfill the wonderful potential that is possible in the inheritance you have for the saints. And that you, Lord Jesus, might discover and fulfill in us all that is involved in your inheritance in us. For we pray Christ's name. Amen.

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