

Romans 1: The gospel – the power of God for salvation...

Overview

Romans is unquestionably the greatest of Paul's letters and the widest in its scope. Some would even argue that Romans is the most powerful document that has ever been written – why? Some of the greatest Christian leaders in history have been inspired by this book – St Augustine (fourth century); Martin Luther (sixteenth century) whose understanding of the great theme of Romans (“the righteous shall live by faith”) ushered in the Protestant Reformation; John Bunyan (*Pilgrim's Progress*); John Wesley whose preaching caused the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century; and Karl Barth whose studies in Romans in the twentieth century shook the theological world...

This chapter tells us about:

... which is about	<i>the gospel of God</i> (v 1);
... which is	<i>the Son of God</i> (v 4);
... which is	<i>the power of God</i> for the salvation of everyone who believes (v 16);
... needed because	<i>the righteousness from God</i> that is by faith (v 17);
	<i>the wrath of God</i> is being revealed from heaven against ungodliness (v 18)...

Introduction and Paul's longing to visit Rome (Romans 1 v 1 to 17)

Paul wrote Romans from the city of Corinth as he wintered there on his third missionary journey (Acts 20 v 1 to 3 – and see Romans 16 v 1; Romans 16 v 23; 1 Corinthians 1 v 14), with the date of writing between 53 and 58 AD. When Paul wrote the Book of Romans, he had been a preacher for some 20 years. On his way to Jerusalem, he had three months in Corinth without any pressing duties. He perhaps thought this was a good time to write ahead to the Christians in Rome, a church he planned to visit after the trip to Jerusalem.

As Paul endeavoured to go to Rome, the Holy Spirit warned him about the peril awaiting him in Jerusalem (Acts 21 v 10 to 14). What if he were unable to make it to Rome? He must write them a letter so comprehensive that the believers in Rome had the gospel Paul preached, even if Paul himself were not able to visit them. Other New Testament letters focus on the church and its challenges and problems, but Romans focuses on God and his great plan of redemption. From a central point Paul builds a logical progression of concentric circles, like a target. The bull's eye is *Jesus Christ our Lord* (v 4), whose *gospel* (v 1), brought to us through the *apostle* (v 1), is received by the *Roman Christians* (and us), and reaches out to the *nations of the world* (v 8, 16)...

- How was Jesus “declared to be the Son of God” (v 4)? What does Paul say about himself and his ministry (v 1, 5, 9, 10)?
- In particular, what was the objective of Paul's apostleship (v 5)?
- Why did Paul want to go to Rome? To whom was Paul obligated (v 14)?
- What does Paul say about the gospel? Why is the gospel “the power of God for salvation” (v 16)?
- What do you think the phrase “the righteous shall live by faith” (v 17) means? How else do many people try to live?

“I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome” (v 15) – I am ‘eager’ or ‘ready’: Charles Spurgeon wondered if Paul didn't use the words ‘I am ready’ as his motto. Almost the first words out of his mouth when he was saved were, “Lord, what do you want me to do?” (Acts 9 v 5, 6): (i) Paul was ready to preach and to serve (v 15); (ii) Paul was ready to suffer (Acts 21 v 13); (iii) Paul was ready to do unpleasant work (2 Corinthians 10 v 6); (iv) Paul was ready to die (2 Timothy 4 v 6).

[MORE OVER...]

“I am not ashamed of the gospel” (v 16) – this reveals Paul’s heart. In a sophisticated city like Rome, some might be embarrassed by a gospel centered on a crucified Jewish Saviour and embraced by the lowest classes of people, but Paul is not ashamed. “Because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes” – this is why Paul is not ashamed of a gospel centred on a crucified Saviour. He knows that the gospel – the good news of Jesus Christ – has *inherent power*. Rome thought it knew all about power, but despite all their power, the Romans, like all people, were powerless to make themselves righteous before God. “First to the Jew, then to the Gentile” – this was the pattern of the spread of the gospel, demonstrated both by the ministry of Jesus (Matthew 15 v 24) and the initial ministry of the disciples (Matthew 10 v 5, 6).

“For in [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed” (v 17) – the gospel reveals the righteousness of God to those with faith, fulfilling Habakkuk 2 v 4b: the just – that is, the justified ones – shall live by faith. It is essential to understand exactly what the ‘righteousness of God’ revealed by the gospel is. It does not speak of the holy righteousness of God that *condemns* the guilty sinner, but of the righteousness that is *given to* the sinners who puts their trust in Jesus Christ. This is an echo of Paul’s message in Galatians 3 (v 1 to 3, 11).

God’s wrath against mankind (Romans 1 v 18 to 32)

“The wrath of God is revealed from heaven” (v 18) – the idea is simple but sobering – God’s wrath is revealed from heaven against the human race, and the human race *deserves* the wrath of God. We sometimes object to the ‘wrath of God’ because we equate it with human anger, which is motivated by selfish reasons or by a desire for revenge. We must not forget that the wrath of God is completely *righteous* in character.

- What do you understand by “the wrath of God” (v 18)? Why is it being “revealed from heaven”?
- What two invisible attributes of God are revealed in nature (v 20)? How are they revealed?
- What do you think is the significance of the phrase “God gave them up” (v 24, 26, 28)?
- Verses 29 to 32 are a commentary on first century Roman ‘civilization’. Are things really any better in the twenty-first century? In what ways do you see God’s wrath at work in the world today?

“God’s invisible attributes... have been clearly perceived” (v 20) – God shows us something of his eternal power and divine nature through creation. He has given a general revelation that is obvious, both in creation and within the mind and heart of man. “Although they knew God, they did not honour him as God...” (v 21) – the problem is not that man did not know God, but that he *did* know him, yet refused to glorify him as God. Therefore, mankind is without excuse. Instead of glorifying God we transformed our idea of him into forms and images more comfortable to our corrupt and darkened hearts.

“God also gave them up” (v 24) – in his righteous judgment, God gives us up to our evil desires, allowing us to experience the self-destructiveness of sin. Hosea 4 v 17 expresses this idea of God ‘giving us up’: ‘Ephraim is joined to idols; leave him alone’. “They exchanged the truth about God for a lie” (v 25), literally *the lie* – in every rebellion against God we exchange the truth of God for the lie, in setting the creature before the Creator. The lie is essentially idolatry, which puts us in the place of God – see Genesis 3 v 5. The list in verses 29 to 31 gives examples of the things which “ought not to be done”. Notice how ‘socially acceptable’ sins such as arrogance, envy and deceit are included with ‘socially unacceptable’ sins such as murder...

Prayer – Lord, we are saddened when we see your wrath revealed from heaven against godlessness and wickedness in the world, but we rejoice when we remember that the gospel is your power that brings salvation to everyone who believes. Help us never to be ashamed of the gospel, but as Paul was eager to preach in Rome, help us also to share the gospel with our friends and colleagues, in Jesus’ name, Amen.