

Brief Summary of Romans

Right from the start Paul states themes that are of striking importance. In verses 1–6, before he has even said ‘Dear Romans’ he sets out a key truth that God promised the Gospel in the Scriptures of Israel. He will fill out the content of this on page after page of the letter. In the service of God Paul is bringing this Gospel to the Gentiles ‘to bring about the obedience of faith’ (1.5).

He hopes to share ministry with the Roman believers – he to them and they to him – as part of a triumphant proclamation of the power of God to save all people.

The Gospel is able to save people from the wrath of God. The word ‘wrath’ comes up a dozen times in the letter pointing to God’s passionate action to put right a damaged world. The wrath is known first in God handing people over to their own ways (when that is what they have stubbornly chosen; 1.24,26,28) and will be clearly seen on the day of judgement (2.5).

The believers in Rome would not have individually read the letter: it would have been read aloud to them by Phoebe, Paul’s messenger (16.1). It is a more dramatic setting for hearing a message that sitting quietly at home! Knowing the setting well Paul uses a special technique to get his message across in Chapter 2.

In order to make it plain that all are subject to God’s wrath Paul debates with two representatives who we might call ‘Everyman’ and ‘Typical Jew’. To ‘Everyman’ he makes the point that knowing God’s ways and passing judgement on others is no good if in truth you do them yourself (2.3). In debate with the ‘Typical Jew’ he asks whether the person who tries to teach others should not teach themselves (2.21) and quotes Scripture to bring out the reputation the ‘Typical Jew’ has leads to Gentiles blaspheming (2.24/Isa 52.5). Paul accepts that circumcision – the badge of being a Jew – is of value but quotes the truth, familiar from the prophets, that real circumcision is a matter of the heart.

He continues in Chapter 3 by bringing out that the advantage in being a Jew lay not in individual righteousness but in having the oracles of God (3.2) – the Scripture. He includes a string of quotations to establish his point and could easily have gone on much longer if he had wanted to offer an exhaustive list. The Old Testament has huge quantities of suitable material. He turns down this opportunity however because his point is to establish the Gospel! Now, he says, apart from the law (3.21; though entirely consistently with the promises of God in the law and the prophets) God has shown his good faith by offering Jesus, a sacrifice made effective through faith.

Despite the number of times Paul has already stated that the Gospel arises from God’s promises in the Old Testament experience has taught him that people might still misunderstand and think that he was putting the Old Testament to one side. In answer to the possible question ‘Do we then overthrow the Old Testament (the law) by faith?’ He answers emphatically that he upholds the Old Testament (3.31). He then offers the story of Abraham as a worked example to show that faith, not circumcision, was always the real key to Abraham’s relationship with God and to point out that God had promised Abraham that he would be the father of many nations (4.17/Gen 17.5) making it clear that God’s promises were not just for the adherents of the law (4.16, ie not just for the Jews).

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Paul started the letter by talking about Jesus. In chapter 3 he has drawn attention to the way God has acted 'now' in Jesus. He has established that all along God called people to 'faith' and not just to 'circumcision'. At this point he can start to build on what follows from living by faith.

It makes sense of Paul's experience and that of the earliest church. All the suffering and endurance and painful character building is seen in a new light alongside faith and peace with God. It produces a firm hope that given what God has already done – God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us (5.10) – nothing will be able to separate the Christian from God again (compare with the end of chapter 8). He goes on to contrast Adam and his sin with Christ and his grace to show that despite the effect of sin the grace of God is yet more wonderful.

Sadly the good news is sometimes misunderstood and Paul turns again to the dramatic device of taking possible questions from the people. Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? (6.1) or Should we sin because the law doesn't matter (we are not under law but under grace)? (6.15). The answer to both questions is 'By no means' and he explains that following the logic of coming to faith means also living by faith. The point should no doubt have been clear much earlier (1.17 / Hab 2.4) but Paul wants to leave no possible room for doubt.

So was the law fundamentally faulty? No. of course not. What has happened is that the coming of the law has revealed what we are really like. We are told the right way to behave and we find ourselves doing something else. Was it perhaps that all the law achieved was to bring about a conviction. 'Did what is good then bring death to me?' (7.13) However much it might look like that a closer examination shows clearly that it wasn't the law but sin which produced that result. In many ways the coming of the law led to a repeat of the story of Genesis 3. Is there a solution to this plight? The solution is found in the coming of Jesus. 'If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies ...'

The fullness of all of this lies in the future. Current experience is of ongoing struggle and suffering. In this setting it is vital to know that the Spirit dwells within. The evidence of the Spirit's presence is in the prayer 'Abba, Father' (8.15) and the groaning while we wait for the promised future (8.23). This gives us confidence that all things will (eventually) work together for good (8.28) and that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God (8.39)

At several points in the letter it has been clear that Paul is writing to a mixed group of people some of whom were previously Gentiles and others Jewish. The argument of the letter seems to have been designed to improve understanding between these groups. It appears that the former Gentiles may have been in the stronger position and possibly even lorded it over the others at times. Romans 9–11 picks up the question of the Jewish people.

Paul passionately wanted his own race to have faith in Jesus (9.3–5) but as with all his thinking he starts by asking what God is saying about the issue. He quotes numerous passages to demonstrate that it has always been the case that some have been faithful and others not, that God has chosen some to work with rather than others. He goes on to explain that the goal had always been Jesus. Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes (10.4).

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But that is not the end of the story. At the beginning of chapter 11 Paul asks: has God rejected his people? And responds to his own question with an emphatic 'No!' If God had rejected his people then it would not be Paul from the tribe of Benjamin writing the letter! He compares his situation to that of Elijah who wondered if he alone was faithful and was assured that there others he did not know about (1 Kings 19.18).

Paul went on to describe the position of the Israelites as a stumbling rather than a fall (11.11). He then explored the image of an olive tree with some branches broken off and wild olive grafted in. This is a powerful picture of the grace of God in keeping the tree alive, in generosity to the wild olive and at the same time a warning to the wild (Gentile) olive not to get above itself – could not God as easily break off the wild olive and graft back the original? Then, in a key verse, Paul celebrates that the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable (11.29). Somehow God's mercy will be offered to his ancient people.

All God's people should offer themselves in sacrificial service and mutual ministry. They are called to live in harmony. In the time of waiting for all to be revealed each should love their neighbour.

Some come to faith with many scruples ('weak in faith' (14.1)) while others have a more robust outlook. It is wrong to sit in judgement one over another as each one is accountable themselves to God (14.12). We should put up with one another's weaknesses and welcome each other at all times.

Paul then outlines his plans for a visit and his ongoing mission, but explains that he must first complete the delicate task of bringing the collection he has made to Jerusalem. After a series of greetings he finishes with a strong exhortation about those who make trouble in the church and then by offering a prayer of blessing.