ROMANS

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St. Paul's Letter to the Church at Rome

This letter is usually referred to simply as "Romans." It is the longest and most systematic of Paul's letters. It serves to introduce Paul to a church he did not found and has not yet visited. He intends to do so in the hope that the Roman congregation will support his further mission to Spain. The letter, for all its length, is not a complete statement of Paul's position. For his understanding of the church, one must turn to Corinthians; for his Christology, one must turn to Colossians and Philippians (Romans 1:3-4 is a traditional formula); for his thought about the eschaton (the end), one must turn to Thessalonians (and then recognize in Philippians 1:23 that he changed his mind in that respect).

The theme of the letter is the righteousness of God, a term and its meaning Paul
takes from Isaiah. It means the vindicating activity of God on behalf of His people. We encounter that theme in 1:17, but it will not be developed until 3:21 and following.

Instead of our customary table of contents, ancient writers commonly present at the beginning of a work a condensed summary of what is to come. In the very first paragraph of Romans we encounter words and ideas that will recur as we read along: call, apostle, gospel, promise, Jesus Christ the Son of God, resurrection, obedience, and faith.

After a thanksgiving which speaks of the mutuality of apostle and church, Paul expresses his eagerness to preach the gospel at Roma, and then states the theme of his letter: the righteousness of God. He does so by turning first to the wrath of God, which is revealed against all who suppress the truth about God. To the consequences of false choice, God “gave them up,” a phrase repeated in 1:24, 1:26 and 1:28. Those consequences are every manner of wickedness and depravity, and even Jews, who have the knowledge of
God in the Torah, condone such conduct and fall under that wrath.

What then is the advantage of the Jew? Paul raises the question (Romans 3:1-2 and at 3:9), but annoyingly does not give his answer until 9:1. At this early point in the letter it is enough for him to say that the effect of the Law is to produce knowledge of sin. He then goes on to develop the theme of the righteousness of God, received through faith in Jesus Christ, which he develops in three picture-language metaphors. The first of these is justification, a law court term meaning acquittal; the second is redemption, a slave-market term indicating freedom; and expiation, referring to Temple worship and meaning in effect, reconciliation achieved by atonement. Those are the benefits to be accessed by faith.

What Paul means by faith is clearly and, one may say, strategically illumined by the introduction of Abraham as his story is told in Genesis 15. A common error is to confuse faith with belief, or worse, substitute belief for faith. Despite the occurrence of the term “believed” in 4:3,
it is clear that the faith of Abraham consisted of trusting in God in spite of his circumstances (4:19-20). Abraham’s act of faith (trust) preceded his reception of circumcision as covenant and the establishment of the covenant with Moses. Hence faith in God is open to Gentiles as well as to Jews. Here, then, we have introduced the main point of Paul’s affirmation, to be spelled out in detail in chapters 9-11, that the Gentiles too are heirs of the promises of God declared to Israel.

Chapters 5-8 deal with the freedom bestowed upon us by the righteous action of God in Christ on our behalf. There should be no break between chapters 4 & 5, nor between 6 & 7, but for convenience we’ll use the chapter divisions as they are printed in our translations. As we move into chapter 5, we pick up the key terms to which we were already introduced in condensed fashion in 3:21-26. To the terms justification, redemption and expiation we now add the word grace (5:2 & 15).

We pause on that term, grace, used in the salutation and some 15 times in the
course of the argument. In Paul's time, it was a colorless, common word used as casually as we use "thanks." It has no special philosophical or religious meaning. Paul took that clean bottle and filled it with the new wine of the Gospel so that it came to refer to all the good possibilities of life made available in Christ Jesus. As a technical religious term, it is a Pauline invention. Life in grace is possible because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given us, the ground of all hope (5:5). The love of God is shown in the death of Christ on our behalf, in our stead, for it took place while we were sinners (the wages of sin is death). We are delivered from the death to which sin and the law consigned us by Christ's crucifixion thus establishing us as reconciled to God, in the realm of grace.

Chapter 6 opens with a statement that seems to assume that the Roman believers understood entering the waters of baptism as a symbolic death, and Paul builds on that understanding. It is a death to the power of sin, just as in 7:4 there will
be a death to the law. In both cases, what counts is identifying oneself with Christ in his death and resurrection. We notice that things don’t quite match-up: Jesus was actually raised from the dead; we only “walk in newness of life” (6:4) while looking forward to sharing in Christ’s resurrection. Christ actually died to sin; we are to consider ourselves dead to sin.

There is the paradoxical use of the word “slave” in chapter 6. Slavery to sin is just that, slavery. Whereas being a slave to obedience (vs 16), or to righteousness (vs 18), or to God (vs 22) is that perfect freedom in grace that expresses itself precisely—in obedience. Notice Paul’s language at this point: we are committed to a standard of teaching, rather than a standard of teaching being committed to us. There follows another asymmetry: sin pays wages, but eternal life is a gift from God.

As in the transition from chapters 4 to 5 there should be no break, so here the thought of chapter 7 flows on from that of 6. In chapter 6 it was death to sin, here it is death to the law. The apparent analogy
in 7:1-4 has been a source of confusion. There is but one point. Death ends the authority of law; only, it is we who die rather than the law (so verses 4, 6, 9, 13), hence no analogy. The major problem in chapter 7, however, comes in reading verses 9-14 as if they were written by Augustine or Luther. Paul was not a tormented soul nor a divided person. He was a contented Pharisee who could look the 613 prescriptions of the Law in the face and declare himself blameless, as he does in Philippians 3:6. His attitude toward the Law would be that of Psalm 119:97: “Oh how I love thy law, It is my meditation all the day.” The Law was Israel’s distinctive treasure, its pride and joy, and Paul was an Israelite indeed (Phil 3:5-6), and remained one to the end of his days. To read his account of his call, expressed in the words Jeremiah used of his, and treat that as the account of a conversion (under the influence of Acts) blocks any understanding of 7:12: “So the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.” Paul delighted in the Law and approved it wholly (vs 22). His problem
was not any doubt or division regarding the Law, but the attack upon him of sin, which he thought an external power that moved in on him, leading him to do the evil of which he does not approve (7:19-20).

It is perhaps unwise to try to get inside Paul’s mind on that score, but we can approach it from our modern point of view. We all are born into a world where sin exists, and none are exempt from its onslaught. If we participate in the benefits of the common life and our civilization, we are also responsible for participating in its evil. Deliverance from this body of death comes to us as it did to Paul, through the Lord Jesus Christ, who died to sin once for all and thus ended its control.

Chapter 8 is perhaps the climax of Paul’s glorious march through this section of his letter. It is the great chapter on the Spirit which affirms not what we are delivered from, but what we are delivered into. The term Spirit occurs at least 18 times. We observe how fluid Paul’s language is—he is systematic, but not
writing systematic theology. In 8:9-12 he can speak interchangeably of the Spirit, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead, and his Spirit which dwells in you.

It is advisable at this point to say something about the meaning, or meanings, of the word “spirit,” which next to the word love is perhaps the most ambiguous and loosely-used word in our language. The characteristics of human spirit are self-understanding, self-transcendence, and self-determination. That means that the term spirit when used of us is a synonym for self or person. And persons are able to communicate with other persons using words (primarily) and what we call non-verbal communication. Just so, the Spirit of God communicates with our spirits using the things, events and persons of our world as communication media. (See the analogy Paul puts forward in I Corinthians 2:9b-13).

The term Spirit has thus a mental dimension, but it also has another dimension as suggested by its other basic connotation: the word is *pneuma*, which
means wind or breath. Spirit refers to the pervasive power of God through which his purposes are fulfilled. In relation to us, the Spirit is spoken of in three ways: as that in which we live, as that which dwells in us, and as the Spirit that intercedes for us. In each case the term Spirit and the term Christ are interchangeable. The other term occurring frequently in this chapter that calls for clarification is “flesh.” That term does not refer to the physical dimension of a human being, but to the quality of being human: limited, transitory, weak. Life according to the flesh is the way of death: life in accordance with the Spirit is the way of life, because God has adopted us as his children. To that status the Spirit testifies in communication with our spirits (the mental component of Spirit) enabling us to live by the Spirit (the power component). However, in the present we experience only the first fruits of the Spirit, and wait in hope for the completion of our redemption—for which the whole created order also waits.

That brings us to the question which Paul raised in 3:1-2 and has not yet
(through chapter 8) dealt with, the issue of the Jewish rejection of the Christ. Paul deals with that in chapters 9-11, but it is vitally important to see and feel the poignancy and pain of what Paul says in 9:1-5 (reiterated in 10:1-4 and in 11:1-2). (Think again of what Paul says of himself in Philippians 3:4a-6). The gift and the call of God are irrevocable (11:29). How is it, then, that Israel has rejected the Gospel and the Gentiles have heard it? Paul deals with that agonizing (certainly for him) question in chapters 9-11. In this introductory essay, it may be permissible to abridge and summarize drastically.

The premise of chapter 9 is the unabridged and unabridgeable sovereignty of God, his unchangeable right to do what he will with his own creation. The premise of chapter 10 is, on the other hand, that Israel's behavior is sufficient reason for her rejection. But chapter 11 shows that the rejection of Israel is temporary, in order to make room for the Gentiles who will, in the end, be grafted onto the parent stock, Israel. In the end, all Israel, those who are Israelites by birth, and the
Gentiles who are Israelites by faith, will be saved.

Chapters 12-15 deal with the subject of the kind of life appropriate to those who have been justified, redeemed, sanctified (3:21-25). Here we may avail ourselves of the insight of C.H. Dodd. He has shown that the specific ethical injunctions (as we should call them, which are in large part common to ethical teachers in the Hellenistic world), are in Paul’s hands leavened at four points by motifs derived from the Gospel: 1.) the expectation of the end; 2.) concern for the welfare of the Body of Christ; 3.) the imitation of Christ; and 4.) the primacy of love. Chapter 15 is the real end of the letter, referring again to Paul’s plans. The appended chapter 16, which contains greetings to individuals in the Roman congregation probably known to Paul through visitors to that church is rounded out by a prayer and a doxology.
Outline of Romans

1:1-15 Intro: Paul’s obligation to preach the Gospel

1:16-17 Theme: He who through faith is righteous shall live

I. 1:18-4:25 He who through faith is righteous (ho dikaios ek pisteôs)

1:18-3:20 The old aeon—under the wrath of God

1:18-32 Unrighteousness

2:1-3:20 Righteousness by the law

3:21-4:25 The new aeon—the righteousness of God

3:21-26 The righteousness of God revealed through Christ

3:27-31 Faith, justification, and the law

4:1-25 The righteousness of God, witnessed to by the law and the prophets: Abraham as the type for those who through faith are righteous.

II. 5:1-8:39 He who through faith is righteous shall live (ho dikaios ek pisteôs zêsetai)
5:1-11  Free from wrath
5:12-21  The two aeons: Adam and Christ
6:1-23  Free from sin
7:1-25  Free from the law
8:1-39  Free from death

III. 9:1-11:36  The righteousness of faith (diakaiosune ek pisteos) does not violate God’s promises
9:6-29  In his promise, God shows his sovereignty: the promise only to those who believe
9:30-10:31  Israel is herself responsible for her rejection, for she seeks her righteousness through the law.
11:1-36  When her time is come, Israel will be accepted by God’s free compassion.

IV. 12:1-15:13  The behavior of those who through faith are righteous (ho dikaios ek pisteos peripatei)
12:1-13:14  In conformity to the new age
12:1-2  Transformation by the renewal of your mind
12:3-8  In Christ (as members of the body)
12:9-21  In love
13:1-7  Even in the present aeon with its institutions
13:8-10  Love the fulfillment of the law
13:11-14  "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ"
14:1-15:13  Specific applications: the weak and the strong
15:14-16:27  Concluding personal notes and observations
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