

Romans: Theological Introduction and Conclusions

Theological Setting

How should the salvation God has revealed in Jesus Christ influence the way we live and understand our relationship with God? It was mainly regarding this question that Paul wrote to the church at Rome sometime around AD 55. He was probably in Corinth, the capital of what is now called Greece, during the three made by the churches in Macedonia and Achaia to the poor Christians in Jerusalem and then to engage in missionary work in Spain, visiting the Romans on his way (15:25-28). Paul hoped his visit with the Christians in Rome would be mutually beneficial (1:11-13) and that he could journey on to Spain with their support (15:24).



Paul's letter to the Romans had a dual purpose. He sought to introduce himself and his understanding of the gospel to the Romans. He also wanted to deal with some of the problems in the church (14:1-16) and the misunderstanding of his preaching that they had heard (3:8; 6:1-2, 15). Romans is not as devoted to and determined by the church's problems as is, for example, 1 Corinthians. For this reason the apostle was free to communicate how he understood what God has done for us in Christ. Romans, thus, mirrors Paul's nearly twenty years of reflection on the gospel and his experience as an apostle among the churches.

Paul knew from his own experience (Acts 9:1-19) that the gospel was "the power of God for...salvation" (Rom 1:16) and that he was under obligation to make it clear what salvation should mean in the lives of persons (1:16-17). From his experience with churches, he knew the Romans needed to keep some things firmly in mind if they were to realize the fullest benefits of salvation:

1. Who needs to be saved?

The Roman church contained both Jews and Gentiles who had become believers in Christ. The Jewish Christians were inclined to feel they were not as sinful as the Gentile Christians because of the high morals they had practiced as Jews. Paul reminded the Jewish Christians they had not fully kept the law (2:1-3:8) and that their sins were so visible as to cause Gentiles to blaspheme God's name (2:24). Gentiles might plead they had no revelation and were less guilty, but Paul affirmed they, too, were without excuse. They should have learned from the creation itself but had rejected such knowledge (1:18-23). Paul concluded that all – both Jewish and Greeks – are under sin and that no person has ever been good enough for God to justify him or her apart from Christ (3:10-20).

2. What can persons do to be saved?

The Jews felt they earned God's favor by doing good works as the law prescribed. The Gentiles generally believed that specified sacrifices caused their gods to favor them.

These ideas tended to persist among the Christians with the Jews remembering the law and the promise to Abraham (4:1-24), while the Gentiles remembered how they had been taught that eating certain foods or celebrating special days pleased their gods (14:1-12). Paul summoned the Christians to remember that all persons have only one way of salvation – “justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (3:24).

3. What is the source of salvation?

God saves persons on the basis of trust in Christ, and this trust is focused in what Jesus accomplished in His death. Paul knew the importance of the teachings of Jesus. He applied these teachings in his exhortation (13:8-10). He knew, however, that true Christian faith must focus in and make central the death of Jesus. He reminded the Romans that Christ’s death was for us – “the ungodly” (5:6) – and that His death demonstrated God’s love (5:8). Christ’s dying for us not only allows us to be “justified by His blood” (5:9); but it is also, as Paul wanted the Romans to remember, our basis for a continuing relationship with God in which we shall be “saved through his life” (5:10) and are able to “rejoice in God” (5:11). See also 5:2-5.



4. What is the practical result of faith in Christians’ lives?

Trust in Jesus Christ makes Christians struggle against sin in their lives and provides the resources to overcome sin. Paul knew that all people were vulnerable to sin, which meant they did not achieve the life God intended. Rather, they were trapped in an existence that could be called death (6:23). This death could come the so-called grosser sins to which the Gentiles were tempted (13:13-14), through social sins which Jewish law did not prohibit (12:14-18), or through allowing freedom in Christ to decay into rules and practices which destroyed Christian fellowship (14:1-15:13). Knowing that his readers were vulnerable to assaults from all these and other directions which could lead to sin reigning in their lives (6:12-14), Paul forcefully reminded his readers that their having trusted Christ constituted crossing a boundary from death to life (6:5-11). Paul used the symbolism of their baptism to press his point: their baptism pictured their entrance into death to sin through symbolic burial with Christ, and their resurrection with Him to a new life in which “death no longer had dominion” (6:9). The baptism of the Christian portrayed what happened at the moment of trusting Christ when one passed from the dominion of sin (6:14) to that of righteousness (6:18). This experience with Christ summons Christians to accomplish in their own lives what Christ had accomplished for them. They have been set free – they must not be sin’s slave (6:15-18); they have become slaves of righteousness – they must yield themselves to God (6:19-22). The struggle with sin is agonizing because of sin’s power (7:13-20) and because of the painful realities about one’s self that must be faced (7:15-18, 21-23). This struggle would lead to despair if one had only his or her own strength to rely on (7:24), but God provides Christians with the “Spirit of life” in Christ Jesus (8:2) so that His children can live in the Spirit (8:9-11) and according to God’s will (8:3-8).

5. As Christians, can we trust God, or must we fear His judgment?

God may be trust to be merciful and faithful. For the Roman Christian community which contained both Jews and Gentiles, the fact that most Jewish persons did not accept Christ as Messiah was troubling. For the Jewish Christians, it raised the questions of God’s faithfulness to His promises to Israel as they had understood them (9:4-6). For the

Gentile Christians it raised the question of their proper attitude toward Jewish Christians (11:13-32). Paul's stress in Romans 9-11 is that God has been faithful to His promises, properly understood, because His salvation was pledged to the remnant who were faithful (9:6-29) and not to Jewish descent as some had believed. God had always saved persons on the basis of their faith (10:1-20); and the disobedience of the Jew (10:21) should not obscure the fact that a remnant of Christian Jews existed, establishing God's faithfulness (11:1-12). Granted this, both Jewish and Gentile Christians needed to understand that salvation was based on God's mercy and that God's promises always rested on this foundation (11:13-32) with the result that all Christians could say, "To him be the glory forever! Amen" (11:36).



Paul stressed the five areas discussed above because he knew faithfulness to God and the full realization of what He offered persons in their salvation in Christ depended on both adequate awareness of what God had done and on strenuous dedication to do what God wanted done.

Theological Outline

Romans: The Revelation of God's Righteousness in Salvation through Jesus Christ for All Persons

- I. Introduction: Qualifications and Reason for Writing (1:1-15)
 - A. Apostolic calling qualifies the author (1:1-7)
 - B. Grateful, prayerful concern for the readers motivates the writing (1:8-15)
- II. Theme: The Power for Salvation and the Righteousness of God Are Revealed (1:16-17)
- III. All People Need Salvation from the Power of Sin (1:18-3:20)
 - A. The power of sin rules among the Gentiles (1:18-32)
 1. The Gentiles reject the knowledge of God (1:18-23)
 2. The Gentiles experience the results of rebellion against God (1:24-32)
 - B. The power of sin rules among the Jews (2:1-3:8)
 1. The Jews demonstrate their disobedience (2:1-16)
 2. The Jews confuse privilege and responsibility (2:17-3:8)
 - C. All humanity – Jews and Gentiles – stand under the power of sin (3:9-20)
- IV. God Provides Righteousness through Jesus Christ on the Basis of Faith (3:21-4:25)
 - A. God manifests His righteousness (3:21-26)
 1. God's righteousness is through faith (3:21-23)
 2. God's righteousness is through the blood of Christ (3:24-25a)
 3. God's righteousness is shown in His passing over former sins (3:25b-26)
 - B. Justification is by faith for all persons (3:27-4:25)
 1. Justifying faith excludes all boasting (3:27-31)
 2. The example of Abraham confirms justification by faith (4:1-25)
- V. Salvation in Christ Results in Victorious New Life (5:1-8:39)
 - A. Justification results in peace and righteousness (5:1-21)
 1. Peace with God results in rejoicing in all circumstances (5:1-11)
 2. Christ reverses the results of Adam's sin (5:12-21)
 - B. Christian life is a victorious struggle with sin (6:1-7:25)

1. Faith unites believers in dying and rising with Christ (6:1-11)
2. Believers are not slaves of sin, but of righteousness (6:12-23)
3. Dying with Christ sets us free from law (7:1-6)
4. Struggle with sin is defeat without Christ (7:7-25)
- C. The Spirit of Christ is the power of the Christian's life (8:1-39)
 1. The Spirit is the power for freedom from sin (8:1-4)
 2. Life in the Spirit is the opposite of life in the flesh (8:5-11)
 3. The Spirit creates and witnesses to our status as God's children (8:12-17)
 4. The Spirit confers victorious life (8:18-39)
- VI. **God Is Faithful in All His Promises (9:1-11:36)**
 - A. Paul grieves over Israel's rejection of Christ (9:1-5)
 - B. God's sovereignty is displayed in His dealings with Israel (9:6-29)
 1. God's sovereignty is illustrated in His elective choices (9:6-13)
 2. God's sovereignty is seen in His mercy (9:14-18)
 3. God has chosen both Jews and Gentiles (9:19-29)
 - C. Israel's freedom to choose explains her rejection of Christ (9:30-10:21)
 1. Israel chose works rather than faith (9:30-33)
 2. Israel rejected righteousness based on faith (10:1-15)
 3. Israel refuses to hear and obey (10:16-21)
 - D. God's righteousness is displayed His mercy (11:1-36)
 1. The saved remnant of Jews shows God's mercy (11:7-24)
 2. All persons – Jews and Gentiles – are dependent on God's mercy (11:25-32)
 3. God deserves praise for His judgments (11:33-36)
- VII. **The Saving Mercy of God in Christ Summons Christians to Obedience (12:1-15:13)**
 - A. Theme of the exhortations: Christians need to be transformed (12:1-2)
 - B. Christians must be responsible members of the body of Christ (12:3-21)
 1. Christians need to view themselves and others appropriately (12:3-5)
 2. Christians must express their different gifts in faith (12:6-13)
 3. Christians life demands love in action (12:14-21)
 - C. Christians must fulfill their appropriate obligations to the state (13:1-7)
 - D. Christians must remember the supremacy of love and the urgency of the times (13:8-14)
 1. Love fulfills the law (13:8-10)
 2. The critical nature of the times calls for radical commitment to Christ (13:11-14)
 - E. Christians must seek to edify one another in the fellowship of the church (14:1-15:13)
 1. The strong and the weak in the church must realize that Christ is the Lord of both groups (14:1-12)
 2. Christians should live by their own convictions, pursue harmony, and avoid making others stumble (14:13-23)
 3. Strong Christians are obligated to bear with and live in harmony with the weak (15:1-6)
 4. All Christians are to receive one another as Christ has received them (15:7-13)
- VIII. **Conclusion (15:14-16:27)**

Theological Conclusions

The Letter to the Romans provides the most extensive discussion in the New Testament of several doctrines that can deepen our theological understanding and Christian

commitment. The righteousness of God, the salvation Christ brings, and the work of the Spirit are three important emphases.

The righteousness of God is featured in Paul's statement of the theme of Romans (1:16-17). The righteousness of God means that God will always do what is just. The righteousness of God stresses what God done more than who He is. The righteousness of God revealed in the gospel is that God sets things right in Jesus Christ. This righteousness which God manifests in the gospel events becomes operative in our lives through faith. Trust or faith is essential both to understand and to avail one's self of the revelation in the gospel (3:22). God declares the sinner righteous (justified) on the basis of what He did in Christ (3:21-26); and the justified person yields his or her life as an instrument of righteousness (6:12-14). Therefore, the result of the righteousness of God is making persons righteous through faith (1:17; 5:1-5).

The salvation that the power of God brings in Christ (1:16) has three dimensions in Christian experience.

The first dimension of salvation (**justification**) comes at the moment one trusts Christ; this is the past experience of salvation which Paul specifically delineates in 8:24: "For in this hope we were saved." This hope is expressed as a movement from death to life (5:17), from being under the power of sin to being justified (6:3-11), and from being the slave of sin to being the servant of God (6:20-22).

The second dimension of salvation (**sanctification**) is the operation of the power of the gospel in the current life of the Christian. Christians look back to an experience of salvation, but they also "live a new life" (6:4) that involves a constant struggle with sin (6:12, 15:23) and they yielding of self "to God...as instruments of righteousness" (6:13). See chs 5-8; 12-15; 1 Co 1:18.

The third dimension of salvation (**glorification**) is in the future. Christians not only are experiencing salvation; they also look to the future with confidence that present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory to be revealed in us (8:18). God is working all things together for our good so we will be "more than conquerors" (8:37), and so our bodies will be redeemed (8:22-23). Paul summed up this future dimension of salvation in 5:9: we shall "be saved from God's wrath through him!"

The discussion of the Holy Spirit in chapter 8 is the most extensive in the New Testament and reflects Paul's distinctive stress on the role of the Spirit in the ethical life of the Christian. The emphasis in Romans is that life in the Spirit is a quality of ethical life which is contrasted with life in the flesh (8:9). The contrasts Paul used are dramatic and instructive: the "law of the Spirit of life" is contrasted with the "law of sin and death" (8:2), the conduct "according to the sinful nature" with that "according to the Spirit" (8:4), and the ones who "have their minds set on what that nature desires" with those who "have their minds set on what the Spirit desires" (8:5). Two life-styles – "controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit" (8:9) – represent the human alternatives. A life in the Spirit is life that fulfills God's demand for righteousness (8:4). The person controlled by a sinful nature is not aware that this is his or her realm of life. Life dedicated to selfish and sinful ways without regard for God proves a person is in the



flesh. The Christian who lives in the Spirit demonstrates this by dedication to Christ, to righteousness, and to others.

Contemporary Teaching

The specific circumstances of modern life and the complex problems they present for Christians may be different, but the distinctive doctrines of Romans have abiding value.

The righteousness of God, understood as God's love in action setting things right, summons us as Christians to realize **that God's intention in declaring us righteous is that we become righteous.** To fulfill the will of God and to become righteous is to be actively involved in what God wishes accomplished in our world. Righteousness is not a state of being, allowing the Christian to be a spectator of life's circumstances; righteousness is the activity in which Christians should be engaged. Righteousness means doing what God wants done in our lives and in our world. To be Christian means to be at work in the task of sharing the gospel (1:14-15), using gifts of service in the church (12:3-8), and demonstrating a life-style that is contrary to the world's by seeking to treat others as Christ's example portrays.

The salvation that the power of God brought to the Romans is also operative in the world today. This salvation provides Christians with **a foundation of assurance, confidence, and hope in a world dominated by insecurity and hopelessness.** Christians know because of past experience with Christ that the highest priority is commitment to a life set free from sin. The logical and intended outcome of trusting Christ is that lives are dedicated to God and lived out in the confidence that there is no ultimate terror in the universe for those who trusted Christ.

Finally, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in Romans summons us to a Christian life centered in **a declaration of war on sin in our lives** and an unending struggle to achieve righteousness in terms of doing what God wants done. To be a Christian is not to achieve a certain level of morality coupled to faithful attendance at church services, but to go far beyond this; to be a Christian is to be in the struggle with the sin in one's life. Christians realize that the struggle is with sin in two of its basic manifestations – sin as activity which is rebellion against God's will and commandments, and sin as existing in those things in our lives which keep us from doing the things God would have us do. The tragedy so many Christians experience is that they have not really enjoyed the fullness of their salvation. The reason is they have failed to recognize that sin is not limited to doing what is forbidden. The most crippling and common sin among many Christians is that they are giving their fiercest energies, prime time, and most creative thought to enterprises that they really know are not life's most crucial priorities. The Spirit of life in Christ calls us to live, to develop our life-styles, and to set our minds on what God desires to have us do in our world. The Spirit leads us to be concerned about this with commitment so that we pray "Your will be done on earth as it is heaven" (Mt 6:10) and then set ourselves to the task of trying to do it.

Source: *The Disciple's Study Bible: New International Version*, annotated by Johnnie Godwin and Roy Edgemon (Nashville, TN: Holman, 1988), 1412-1415.