

## THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS

### Introductory Matters

The Author of the Epistle: The Apostle Paul

The Date of the Epistle: Several factors indicate that Paul dictated the epistle at the end of the third missionary journey, 56 or 57 AD.

The Origin of the Epistle: The most likely location for the writing of the letter was the city of Corinth.

The Occasion and Purpose of the Epistle: The letter has several purposes (Paul's desire to carry the Gospel to the "ends of the earth [Spain]"), to seek prayer support, and to minister to them concerning the turmoil in the fellowships).

The issue relative to the social situation in Rome's assemblies is that of conflict between Jews and Gentiles in the churches, the antithetical perceptions of superiority of status. This likely caused riots in the city in 49 AD and the subsequent expulsion of Jews (Aquila and Pricilla). The problem that Paul addresses is the treatment on one another in the local expressions of the "Body of Christ."

The Nature of the Epistle:

Apart from personal comments in chapter one and others in chapter sixteen the letter has two parts: First, a long argument (1:18-11:36) that there is not gradation of believers because all are sinners before God, all are saved through the unmerited provision of Christ, and all struggle with imperfections with a concluding clarification (God has not abandoned His ancient people by allow Gentiles into His family). Second, Paul gives us the reason for such a lengthy argument. The point of the argument (12:1-15:13) is that believers have a mandate to live in harmony with one another despite differences.

- I. Introduction: the **good news** for all, both Gentile and Jew, 1:1-17
- II. The **universality** of human sinfulness, both Gentile and Jew, 1:18-3:20  
"...all who have sinned without the Law will Perish without the Law;  
and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law (2:12)."  
".... Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin (3:9)."
- III. The **universality** of redemption for the Gentile and Jew by grace apart from works, 3:21-4:25  
"...that the promise may be certain to all descendants. Not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all (4:16)."
- IV. The **universality** of struggle in the redemptive state with the remainders of sin for the Gentile and the Jew (5:1-8:33).  
"For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death (8:2)."

- “... if you by the Spirit are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live (8:13).”
- V. The **universality** of God’s promises. God has not forgotten His ancient people, having granted the promise of a renewal for them, 9:1-11:36  
 “... do not be arrogant toward the branches... (11:18).”  
 “.... Do not be conceited, but fear (11:20).”
  - VI. The **universality** and moral necessity for the Gentile and the Jew life in harmony, 12:1-15:13
  - VII. Conclusion, 15:14-16:27

## Commentary and Comment

- I. Prologue, 1:1-17
  - A. The Salutation, 1:1-7
    - 1. From whom: Paul, v. 1
    - 2. Concerning whom: Jesus Christ, vv. 2-6
      - a. The roots of the gospel: the prophets, v. 2
      - b. The content of the gospel: The Son, vv. 3-4
      - c. The aim of the gospel: an obedience resulting from faith, vv. 5-6
    - 3. To whom: “the beloved of God in Rome”, v.7
  - B. The Situation, 1:8-15
    - 1. Paul’s prayer for the Romans, vv. 8-12
      - a. His commendation of the Romans, v. 8
      - b. His prayers for the Romans, v. 9
      - c. His prayer for himself regarding the Romans, vv.10-12  
 Though a man of many acquaintances, he made it a point to pray for those he had not met.
        - 1) The reason for the prayer, v. 10
        - 2) The twofold content of the prayers, vv. 11–12
    - 2. Paul’s desire to visit the Romans, v. 13  
 His missionary work is complete in and around Greece (15:17-22). By adding the phrase “as among the other Gentiles” that Paul senses a new frontier as well as the Romans.
    - 3. Paul’s debt to the world, vv. 14-15  
 The apostle makes two confessions: “I am a debtor” and “I am ready.” The first speaks of obligation, the second of volition.  
  
 “Greeks and barbarians” likely mean all Gentile humanity though divided into two groups, the cultured and the uncouth, the educated and the illiterate. “Wise and foolish” probably refers to the same two groups.  
  
 The term “gospel” is inclusive of the whole range of Christian truths from redemption to glorification.
  - C. The Subject: The Gospel, 1:16-17  
 These verses consist of four subordinate clauses, each supporting or illuminating the one before it. They compose the theme of the letter. In a sense Paul concludes

the introduction in the manner he began the letter; he again focuses on the gospel (vv. 2-6). Here the emphasis is not so much on the person who is the center of the gospel, but the accomplishments of His person and work (the gift of divine righteousness).

Mounce says that these verses are pivotal New Testament verses because they state concisely and unequivocally the essence of the good news that is the gospel. The righteousness that is required for the acquittal of sinner is not that of a reformed sinner, but the very righteousness that is God's.

1. The power in it, v.16

The "for" states the reason he is eager to preach in Rome; it is also the third "I am" statement, "I am not ashamed." (Do I detect a three-point "I am" talk here?) The reason for his unabashed desire to preach is that the message saves. It grants a complete salvation from the penalty (immediately), power (progressively), and presence (finally) of sin. What other message can do that? Paul uses the word "salvation" with an eschatological nuance; it speaks of deliverance from judgment that is finalized only at the last day.

"Believe" implies intellectual assent, but it is more than that. In Pauline literature, it means a surrender to God as an act of the will (4:18, 10:9). Faith does not have moral value; it is not the cause of salvation. Faith receives a salvation from God because of the accomplishments of Christ.

2. The righteousness of God through it, v.17a

The "for" continues the chain of reasoning. "I am not ashamed." Why ("for")? It is the power of God displayed. Why ("for")? Through it comes the righteousness of God through faith.

The "righteousness of God" is the key to salvation. It is not the righteousness of a person that saves; it is the righteousness that God gives that does. God gives people His righteousness. He clothes them with a new identity, through the merits of Christ's appeasing death on the cross. The source of righteousness is God. Righteousness is the gift of God whereby He brings His people into right relationship with Himself.

The term, "righteousness of God," can be a divine attribute or something that He bestows. Here it is the latter. "It is a God-righteousness," says Murray. It is a righteousness that meets all the demands of a just God.

3. The scriptural proof of it, v.17b

Paul's citation from the Old Testament shows that his message is not new. It is a text from Habakkuk (2:4) that is applied analogically. In the prophet's day it was a call of faith anticipating deliverance from the Babylonians based on Gen 15:6. Hundreds of years later Paul gives it its fullest and plainest application (Gal. 3: 11). Faith acquires God's righteousness; righteousness is a gift, not a personal achievement!

II. The **universality** of human sinfulness, both Gentile and Jew, 1:18-3:20

(Condemned by the presence and power of sin)

To perceive the remedy is first to establish the need. Martin Lloyd Jones said, “I know of no passage of Scripture which describes so accurately the world of today and the cause of the trouble.”

Divine wrath and divine righteousness are interconnected. The latter is the cause of the former. The righteous character of God is revealed in His just retribution or punishment of sin. Punishment is proportionate, not to the sin, but the person sinned against. Thus, sin brings infinite punishment because the object of any sin is a disregard of the character of God. God must judge all sin because He would not be righteous if He did not. The good news is that God in His righteousness will not express His wrath toward us but give us His righteousness through the punishment-bearing death of Christ so that He is just in no longer expressing His wrath. The manifestation of divine wrath occurs in two sequences: presently and at the consummation of the ages at the Great White (suggestive of the righteousness of it) Throne [believers will not appear here for judgment because there will be no judgment for them since they are all clothed in the righteousness of God through Jesus]. The section before us addresses the temporal aspect to divine wrath (wrath “is being revealed”). The consequences of cheating today are a picture of the cause for wrath to come! In the phrase “ungodliness and wickedness (v.18),” the first term relates to actions against God while the second to actions against people.

One of the questions that I have pondered over the years is this: When Paul refers to a “giving over” when did this happen? When did God give humanity over to the just consequences of rebellion against God? The ultimate answer is found in Gen 3, but is that Paul’s reference point in this passage? He seems to be speak generally noting the cause of mankind’s dilemma: God has justly given them to their own desires. The combination of “godlessness and wickedness” seems to be daily actions. If so, it is reasonable to understand that he is speaking from the perspective of daily experience. The connection to Adam awaits us in chapter 5; here the argument for divine wrath is based on general experience. All sin mandates punishment, both here and hereafter.

This section of the epistle can be structurally outlined as follows. (It is helpful to see the “larger” picture before the details. It is easy to get lost in details and that influences interpretation). Paul’s point is that all mankind stands justly condemned before a holy God.

#### A. The Guilt of the Gentiles, 1:18-32

(The anatomy of accountability; or, why wrath is righteous)

Paul’s beginning point is that all people, without exception, have experienced devolution. Paul argues that all had some knowledge of God and His will. Therefore, their judgment is just considering their derelictions. Here he argues this of all Jews and Gentiles throughout in this larger section (1:18-3:20). There is no favored status based on either ignorance or privilege! It is likely that Paul has 14:1-15:13 in mind as the application.

1. The revelation of God's wrath, v. 18

The "for" connects the verse to the previous mention of the righteousness of God, giving the reason for the need of it (divine wrath). The power of God is evident through the gospel because the human need is so great.

Wrath is the holy revulsion of God against any contradiction to His character. The fact of this is evident in that it is "revealed from heaven." As the gospel is proclaimed, so also is the wrath of God upon the disobedient.

"Ungodliness" (a religious term) looks at sin from the divine perspective; it is against God. "Wickedness" (a moral term) looks from the human perspective. The former is illustrated by idolatry (sin against God), the latter by immorality (sin against others). The two words suggest the two tables of the Ten Commandments.

"Suppress" or "hold down" suggests that mankind has a knowledge of God, but they willingly reject the truth that they know through natural revelation and conscience; ignorance is not man's problem!

*Parenthesis: While the ungodly do not have a knowledge of God that is redemptive, they know that God does exist and that He is demanding. The natural person rejects what is revealed to them through the created universe and their consciences. Though they do not have enough knowledge to embrace God as He is in Christ, they find what they do know to be distasteful and unwanted. The knowledge they have is not sufficient to save, but it is enough to make them aware that they want no more! It is in this way that their condemnation is righteous.*

2. The reason for God's wrath, vv. 19-20

A way to look at the remainder of the chapter is this: (1) Mankind rejected what they knew to be true (vv. 19-20), (2) consequently, they embraced a false self-centered faith (vv. 21-23), and (3) that is evidenced by how mankind behaves (vv. 24-32).

The reason that Paul can say that mankind is guilty before God ("because" [the second "for" in our passage]) is the rejection of the light of natural revelation. The essence of what natural revelation reveals is God's eternal power and deity. God's majesty and glory are known but repressed. The God who is invisible and unknowable has made Himself known through what He has made. "They know the ordinance of God (v. 32)." External to human beings is a wordless book called nature; internal is a sense of good called the conscience.

Though what natural man can know is a confused and indistinct picture of God, their refusal to acknowledge even that reveals callousness. People are born with an inborn hostility to the things of God, a natural negative bias.

Knowledge should lead to reverence and gratitude; instead, it led to idolatry (the exaltation of self).

Paul indicates that creation (v. 20) reveals God's power and divinity. The latter seems to imply the sum of the perfections that characterize God. The Old Testament mentions that other attributes are displayed through His handiwork, namely His wisdom, goodness, and righteousness.

3. The behavior deserving of God's wrath, vv. 21-23

The apostle looks at mankind's just rejection from the human perspective. The use of past tenses in the verbs suggests historical events, probably a summary of man's behavior since the Garden of Eden. The history of mankind is not one of progressive development; it is a trek from faith to apostasy (it is not evolution, but devolution!). Man in knowing something of God should have honored him, but his bias turned him away from what was in his best interest. Instead, mankind created varieties of expressing awareness of transcendent reality; they created their kinds of self-made religion (animals, rocks, nature). The decline to temporalities, like images of beasts, even snakes and scorpions, shows the degeneration of the mind to its lowest possible degree.

Man's trek has been from futility to folly. The foolishness of repressing the truth has led to thanklessness, vanity, ignorance, and idolatry. It is important to note that the apostle is not talking about eternal punishment in these verses; it is temporal judgment. It pertains to life.

"The knowledge of God" in this context is the knowledge derived from the visible creation.

In the NT, "heart" refers to the thinking, willing essence of mankind regarding responsibility to God. It is the decision-makers in our lives!

4. The divine judgment, vv. 24-32

The guilt of Gentiles is stated by the threefold repetition of the phrase, "God gave them over," (vv.24, 26, 28). The phrase frames the paragraph. The essence of a "turning over" is the withdrawal of preserving grace to permit a person to do as he pleases; it is a divine judgment. The paragraph defines the dimensions of human sinfulness.

*Parenthesis: How does God express His wrath?*

*It is important to know that the manner of divine judgment is the removing of the restraints that He places on our desire for waywardness. God's wrath is expressed in allowing people to pursue their desires and passions to their own detriment. In withdrawing protective mercies, in allowing them to do as their passions dictate, makes God's judgments just. We incur God's correction when we do what we want to do contrary to God's directives. At some point,*

*He allows us to disobey; there is a line in the sand! God's judgment in Romans is the removal of restraint!*

- a. Given over to uncleanness, vv. 24-25

“Therefore” indicates a conclusion drawn from verses 18–23.

“To give over,” indicates a judicial act, a definite act of abandonment to idolatry.

“Uncleanness” indicates sexual sin in Paul’s writings. Idolatry leads to immoralities because they are substitutes for fulfillment in God.

Verse 25 gives the reasons (“for”). The “lie” is that mankind can be fulfilled in themselves and others.

- b. Given over to vile passions, vv. 26-27

The apostle turns to the theme of homosexuality (here are God’s clearest comments on the subject in the Bible). The apostle begins with females. (Perhaps he has Genesis 3 in mind; mentioning women first accentuates the grossness of the evil.) By using the term “females,” not women, stress is laid on the animalism of the sex. Before us are lesbian practices and male homosexual relationships. The penalty is not specified; it is received “in themselves.” That is, the judgment of God is found in the consequences of such practices

“The natural use of the women” suggests that sex is grounded in the natural constitution of men and women as established by God. What is clear is that sexual perversion is the judgment of God, it is evidence of the withdrawal of mercies, so people have no inhibitions. See Lev.18:22.

- c. Given over to a reprobate (depraved) mind, vv. 28-32

Their depravity of mind led not to immorality only, but to a whole variety of antisocial practices. Paul’s list is a catalog of twenty-one mental sins.

Four general sins: wickedness, evil, greed, and depravity.

Seven sins depicting broken human relationships: envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice, libel, and slander.

Four sins of extreme pride: God-haters, insolent, arrogant, and boastful.

Two general sins: inventors of evil and rebellious to parents.

Four descriptive negatives: senseless, faithless, heartless, and ruthless.

Verse 32 seems to be the ultimate evidence of mental degeneration, the encouragement of others to do the same. Commending evil appears to be worse than doing it. The present tenses in the verse imply not only something true in the past, but presently.

*Parenthesis: Is Paul being too severe in his descriptions of moral twistedness?*

*It is not reasonable to assume that all unbelievers in his day, or ours, are morally corrupt to the degree that he describes? There is an adage, "There is more common grace in some unbelievers than there is special grace in some believers." God's provision for societal order is not regeneration; it is what believers share with unbelievers; it is what is in rapid decline in our culture. What Paul is doing in this massively negative section is using a well-known rhetorical method of his day; he is pressing home the point that all outside of Christ need salvation. While people are sinners without exception, from a human perspective, some are more devoid of common grace than others.*

#### Applications:

1. Mankind is justly the object of divine wrath because each has received a knowledge of God but reveals the hardness of his/her heart by rejecting it. Everyone has received the witness of the beauty of the natural world, wonderful landscapes, the serenity of a star-filled night, the grandeur of the mountains. An effect must have a cause greater than itself since nothing is self-creative; hence there must be a God. Further, we all have an in-built, intuitive sense of good and wrong, conscience. Do we not all have a sense of the ideal, the perfect? Where did that originate? Did we not once know of this?
2. The human intellect is as erring as the human heart. In every age, those who have relied most on their own understandings have sunk deepest into folly. When information is distorted, resultant action will be as well. Knowledge is the key to our redemption, but knowledge from below is errant and unsafe. Humans can only build utopias in their twisted minds, and it passes away quickly.
3. As the light of nature is insufficient to lead the heathen to God, it is important that they receive the Bible. Nature and conscience are pointers. They can show us that there is a way, but it cannot get us to it. Choices are made based upon the perceived beauty and benefit of the thing chosen. Nature cannot lead us to anything higher than itself. It is only when Christ, the greatest of all objects, is revealed by the Spirit through the agency of the Scriptures can we embrace Him because the Spirit of God and the Holy Scriptures are of divine origin. An infinite effect can only arise from an infinite cause.
4. Are you glad that God has not removed all the restraints from your life, resulting in what would be willing enjoyment of wrong in the name of right? We wish for freedom, but inappropriate freedom can lead because of it. How many times in each of our lives has God intervened through circumstances refusing to allow us to do or say what we wanted to? Have you ever praised the Lord for His restrictive mercies? What does it tell us about the Lord who restrains us from doing what we please at times?
5. Sexual sins are particularly debasing and demoralizing. Of all sexual perversions, the apostle states that homosexuality is the worst. It is not genetic; it is sin. This is not to say that serious



Christian do not struggle with such as some Christians do. As our culture drifts into radical permissiveness, do you find yourself saying something like this? “I know it is wrong, but others simply chose a different lifestyle making it ok for them.” Is the way to help a brother or sister that struggles with this to condemn them bluntly and out rightly? How can you maintain biblical standards and yet show genuine love and compassion? Is not the greatest sin according to the Bible unbelief?

6. Seeking fulfillment in other than the Creator leads to an emptiness that perversion cannot alleviate. Idolatry leads to immorality because the latter is an attempt to find fulfillment apart from the Creator. Do you find contentment in the Lord filling your mind with thoughts of Himself? Here is a truism: Sinful practices, pursued in our rebellion against God in not finding fulfillment in Him, are self-destructive.
7. How does this paragraph provide an explanation for the disruptive social relationships we encounter almost daily; the hostilities leading to the media headlines that you read about every day? If you do not believe that something is dreadfully wrong with humanity, you will have little explanation for what you see and experience. People seek refuge in their expense accounts, entertainments, the building of private utopias, vacations, drugs, and alcohol, but the residual effects are sad memories, hurt, and debt. Does this paragraph not give you pause as well and make you thankful that God loves you so very much that He has delivered you from so much of the chaos?