

A Thematic Exegetical Analysis and Exposition of Romans
Studies in the Pauline Epistles
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Professor John W. Wyckoff, Ph.D.

Joseph Pastori
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I. INTRODUCTION

For years, I have had an interest in classic movies, especially black and white films. Of these, I have a particular fondness for a genre known as "film noir," which are crime dramas that portray life with a rough edge, so to speak. One classic that stands out in this category is a detective story based on a Raymond Chandler novel entitled *The Big Sleep*, which stars Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. Even more than the acting of the famous co-stars, the appeal of this movie for fans lies in the intricate plot. The story line is intriguing, drawing the viewer into its twist and turns. In the end, it all makes sense, even though the plot is delightfully complex. What's more, the viewer can come back time and again and gain a new appreciation for the movie.

Paul's epistle to the Romans also has a very detailed and intricate "plot," so to speak. He goes to great lengths to explore the various angles of the church's concerns, while giving a sublime theological teaching that instructs and inspires. While relevant to the immediate concerns of God's people in Rome, this letter provides a vast framework for the gospel of Jesus Christ for all generations, while providing much of the thematic structure for New Testament teaching.

II. BACKGROUND

A. NEW TESTAMENT SIGNIFICANCE

The book of Romans enjoys respect from both conservative and liberal scholars alike. Among Paul's epistles, it is the least disputed in terms of authorship and authenticity.¹ Because of the breadth of its message and its credibility, it is regarded as the most important of Paul's letters.² Furthermore, though Paul's epistles deal largely with doctrinal issues in situational contexts, it is considered the most theologically developed of his letters.³ It is described as having an "incalculable influence on the framing of Christian theology," and is "arguably the single most important work of Christian theology ever written."⁴

B. HISTORICAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Paul wrote this letter to the believers in Rome. He himself did not establish this church or begin any ministry there. In fact, this, along with Colossae, was the only church that he wrote to that he did not start.⁵ His purpose in writing to these believers was to communicate his desire to visit Rome and preach the gospel (the gospel message he declares in this letter) to the church there.⁶ While Paul may have had a secondary purpose in seeking support from the church for his proposed missions trip to Spain (Romans 15:24, 28)⁷, his message suggests another

purpose in the letter too, which is to subtly address some conflict that existed between Jewish and Gentile believers.⁸

C. CULTURAL CONTEXT

The church in Rome likely did not refer to any one body but rather to a collection of house churches that met throughout the city,⁹ as suggested in Romans 1:7 by Paul's addressing the letter "To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints."¹⁰ These churches, in all probability, grew out of the synagogues, where the message of Christianity would have appeared first.¹¹ Over time, Gentiles also became a part of the church. In fact, if the Jews were indeed expelled from Rome in A.D. 49 (as suggested by Acts 18:2), then the Gentile believers would have risen to leadership in the church. When the Jews eventually made their way back to Rome and into the church, tension would have increased due to a shift in the emphasis away from observing the Law of Moses.¹² This would have led to sharp disagreement over the degree to which observance of the Law of Moses should find its way into the church, whether for Jew or for Gentile. Out of this cultural context, the theme for this epistle emerges.

III. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

A. THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST

It appears that the overall theme of the letter relates to the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹³ Though Paul had not visited this group of believers before, he communicates a strong desire to share the gospel of Christ with them (Romans 1:15). For Paul, the proclamation of the gospel lies at the heart of his ministry as an apostle and servant of Christ (Romans 1:1), and his desire is in keeping with the pastoral (or priestly, as he describes it) concern that he shows for the church of Christ (Romans 15:15-16). This remains a matter of priority for him because of the power of the gospel to save and transform lives (Romans 1:16). Furthermore, the gospel message overall provides the basis by which God will someday judge all people (Romans 2:16). The analysis of the themes that follow show their relationship, in one form or another, to the gospel message as it relates to all people, regardless of their culture or context. These themes, as a whole, are the elements that represent the heart of the gospel message that Paul desires to preach.

B. THE SINFULNESS OF MAN

Paul makes an exceedingly strong case throughout this epistle that all human beings are hopelessly corrupt and sinful apart from God (Romans 3:9-10, 23; 5:12). The human condition remains fraught with rebellion, which causes people to reject the revelation of a just and holy God and his righteous

standards (Romans 1:18-21, 32). As a result, God has given over those who reject him to total depravity (Romans 1:24-31). Even the law of God has not solved the problem of sin that lies in the heart of man, but rather has served to intensify sin (Romans 7:8-9), thereby showing how utterly corrupt the sinful condition is and the depth to which people are enslaved in it apart from God (Romans 7:13-14).

C. THE WRATH OF GOD

As such, human beings, by means of their inherent sinfulness, have become objects of the wrath of God (Romans 9:22). All of humanity stands guilty before Him, with nothing to offset the depth of God's fury. The time draws near when God will ultimately judge the sinfulness of all mankind (Romans 2:5). Because of the universality of sin, that judgment will be all encompassing. This is the expression of a holy God's righteous anger against sin (Romans 3:5), and the Lord does not respect persons or show favoritism in any way. It is because of the urgency associated with the revelation of God's wrath to come that the gospel of Christ appears all the more glorious. Apart from it, humanity has no hope.

D. THE LAW OF GOD

Knowing the terror of God's wrath and that no one stands to escape, Paul also seeks to keep God's people from putting their hope in anything that will not avert God's righteous judgment. In the case of the Jew, that means warning those who put their hope in the Law of Moses. They may think that by keeping the Law, they have a special standing with God or have achieved righteousness by observing the Law. Moreover, they may be tempted to stand in judgment of those who do not keep the Law, condemning them as evildoers (Romans 2:1-3, 12-13). Paul writes of the futility of obtaining a righteous standing before God by way of the Law (Romans 3:19-20; 9:31).

For one thing, Paul shows that Abraham, the forefather of the Jewish people, did not obtain his righteous standing by way of the Law (Romans 4:2-3, 13). He did not receive circumcision as an ordinance of the Law (which was not yet in effect), but as evidence of the righteousness that he had obtained apart from the Law (Romans 4:11). Also, the Law had no power to deal with the root cause of sin, the corruption of the flesh, the human, sinful nature (Romans 7:14, 16, 21-23). The Law could only expose the inherent sinfulness of the flesh but could not provide remediation. The Law itself is not sin, but rather is the instrument that reveals the righteousness of God and evidence of humanity's sinfulness, as it were (Romans 7:7-9).

However, at the same time Paul does not degrade the Law or downplay its purpose in the plan of God. He emphatically states that one cannot achieve righteousness by way of observance of the Law, yet one must show care in avoiding a misinterpretation of Paul's position. He also speaks respectfully of the value of the Law (Romans 3:1-2, 7:12, 22). This is one of the complexities of the intricate "plot" of Romans, so to speak. Paul does not intend to nullify the Law but to declare its fulfillment in Christ (Romans 3:31).

E. THE GRACE OF GOD

Since even the Law cannot provide righteousness, one must wonder what exactly makes the gospel such "good news." How does one obtain the righteousness of God? First, one must correctly understand the real source by which the believer can have access to God's righteousness, and that lies in the grace of God. Though God's wrath shows his indignation against sin, yet through Jesus Christ, he reveals still greater riches of grace (Romans 5:20-21). This grace reveals the depth of God's love, even for fallen humanity in that He offered his Son as a sacrifice for sin. The atoning death of Christ on the cross makes the grace of God readily accessible. Grace accomplishes what the Law could not do—it provides a refuge from the wrath of God (Romans 5:8, 9).

F. THE PRIORITY OF FAITH

Faith, then, becomes the means by which the Christian (whether Jew or Gentile) appropriates the grace of God and obtains righteousness (Romans 1:17; 5:1). Some have suggested that the declaration that "The righteous shall live by faith" could summarize Paul's theology in one statement.¹⁴ This happens apart from the deeds of the Law. Abraham, the forefather of the Jews, serves as an example of this principle. He did not obtain righteousness through circumcision, which speaks of an observance of the Law, but God credited to him as a result of his believing God. He then received circumcision as an outward confirmation of what had already taken place through faith by way of agreement with God. The act of circumcision itself, as a sign of obedience to the Law, did not impute righteousness to him. Faith ensures that the promise of God comes by way of grace (Romans 4:16) In fact, its because he received righteousness apart from the Law that the believer, who also receives justification the same way, can claim an affinity with Abraham (Romans 4:11). In other words, one cannot claim to obtain the righteousness of God by both faith combined with the Law, nor can one receive justification exclusively through the Law. The righteousness of God, as demonstrated by Abraham, can come

solely by way of faith. According to the gospel, no other choice exists.

G. THE WAY OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

This righteousness comes through the finished work of Christ. Since sinfulness passed to the human race through Adam's failure, it set humanity on an irreversible course leading to death, powerless to initiate righteousness from within. Yet, Christ nullified that dynamic through his own righteousness, which he passes on to those who receive it through faith. This shows the true nature of righteousness as obtained through faith in Christ. God's righteousness exists entirely apart from human initiative, and this is the righteousness that Christ passes on to the believer. No amount of human effort can produce the same effect, for by doing so, one denies the efficacy of Christ's atonement. Therefore, the righteousness that comes from God must come from no other source. On this basis, all human boasting and pride in one's deeds ceases.

H. THE SPIRIT VERSUS THE FLESH

The believer shows evidence of the righteousness obtained through faith in Christ in a release from slavery to sin. Apart from Christ, a person is held captive to sin with no moral option. However, in Christ the believer is alive through the

quickenings of the Spirit and therefore has a moral choice, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to leave sin behind (Romans 7:5-6). Since the flesh provides the medium through which sin operates, the Spirit of God stands in opposition to it. At the same time, the flesh cannot submit to the Law of God and will bring death to those who live thereby (Romans 8:7-8). On the contrary, those who live by the Spirit please God, showing evidence of God's work of grace. Furthermore, the Spirit bears internal witness, thus identifying the believer as a child of God (Romans 8:15-16). In the matter of prayer, the Spirit helps the child of God to pray in the will of God, since He (The Holy Spirit) knows the mind of God (Romans 8:26-28).

I. THE MATTER OF ELECTION

With regard to Israel as a people, Paul endeavors to point out that God is not done with them (Romans 11:1-2). They still play a vital role in the Lord's plan, having obtained election through the calling of God, which is irrevocable (Romans 9:28-29). While national Israel (as a geo-political entity and cultural community) has largely rejected Christ, God has preserved a remnant that will be saved (Romans 9:27). These, along with those Gentiles who respond to the gospel, form the spiritual Israel that make up Abraham's seed. Paul equates identity with Israel by way of the condition of the heart (as

evidenced by a response to the gospel), not by human lineage. The person who obeys God's moral decrees shows more characteristics of a descendent of Abraham than the person who lives otherwise, whether in the Law or apart from the Law. In this way he identifies those who belong to Israel (Romans 2:29; 9:6-7).

J. THE JEWS AND GENTILES

Taken as a whole, the gospel of Jesus Christ, then, becomes the basis by which the people of God—both Jew and Gentile—form a unified body by means of spiritual fusion, so to speak. Rather than approach God from different positions (the Jews as insiders who have a preferred place by means of keeping the Law and the Gentiles as outsiders who bypass the Law), both Jew and Gentile have access to the same grace by means of faith in Christ, who is Lord of both the Jew and Gentile. The Israel that forms as a result of this spiritual fusion through the gospel of Christ is the spiritual seed of Abraham, a people whom God had predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, Jesus Christ (Romans 8:29-30).

IV. THEOLOGICAL SYNTHESIS

A. THE INTEGRATION OF THEMES

These themes form the core of the gospel of Christ for all people. This gospel, with all of its elements, provides the message of hope for all humanity. While it communicates emphatically the abhorrence that God has for sin and how it will result in the judgment of all people, it also reveals the heart of God, who, because of his great love, provided the solution to this problem through his own Son. He not only made a way to escape divine wrath through his grace, but also made it possible to obtain the righteousness of God and live free from sin in the power of the Spirit. This good news is available to all who would believe, and in it resides the transformational power of God! This message provides hope for all people—both Jew and Gentile alike, and it has been entrusted to the church of Jesus. The gospel provides a basis by which the church can declare the message of God and show that message at work in the community of believers as a witness to the world.

B. THE INTENTION OF THE AUTHOR

As a pastoral figure, Paul goes to great lengths to present the many facets of the gospel message in an evenhanded way, especially those matters which deal with the Law and the Jewish identity (national and spiritual). He faces a challenge with the Jew in appearing to reject the Law of Moses, while declaring that one cannot obtain justification by attempting to keep it.

On the other hand, he runs the risk of minimizing the importance of the Law of God and the position of Israel as His people. This could cause the Gentiles to look with superiority on the Jew, Yet, though the Gentiles have obtained inclusion by means of God's grace, even that came by way of a partial hardening of Israel (Romans 11:25). Paul warns the Gentiles, lest they become proud, that God could remove them just as easily as He included them, since they owe their inclusion to this spiritual community as a result of His sovereign choice (Romans 11:17-22). By thus presenting his arguments against the many perspectives (represented by both groups) with their diverse interests, Paul seeks to mitigate the tension that exists between these two entities by choosing to steer them to their common bond in Christ through the gospel. As Keener puts it,

In arguing for the ethnic unity of the body of Christ, Paul argues that all people come to God on the same terms, no matter what their ethnic, religious, educational or economic background; Jesus alone is the answer to all humanity's sin. Paul stresses justification by faith, a truth most of his readers would know, especially so he can emphasize reconciliation with one another, a reality they still need to learn.¹⁵

C. THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PRINCIPLES

The evidence of inclusion in the body of Christ (along with citizenship in the commonwealth of Israel) shows itself in practical matters of living and personal conduct. Rather than offer ceremonial sacrifices, as required by the Law, the

believer instead becomes a living sacrifice as an act of worship to God (Romans 12:1). Life in the Spirit takes on the character of love with regard to various matters such as relationships within the body and conflict resolution (Romans 12:9-21). Believers have an obligation as citizens of the community at large and therefore must live responsibly (Romans 13:1-7), knowing that love is the guiding principle in this too. This especially applies with regard to matters of conscience (Romans 14). The believer should show due sensitivity so as not to cause another person to stumble in matters pertaining to food and other issues that are governed by conscience. In this way, the Law finds its fulfillment through a lifestyle of love (Romans 13:8-10).

D. THE IMPACT OF THE MESSAGE

The result is the witness to the world that God intends as evidence of the truth of the message. The preaching of salvation through Jesus Christ is good news because of its power to save and because it presents, by proclamation and by living witness through the community of believers, the hope that God intended for his people to display for all people as a praise to His glory (Romans 15:8-12). The hope of this message and the urgency associated with it fueled Paul's passion to declare it even beyond Rome into Spain and any other place where it had not yet

been proclaimed (Romans 15:18-20). After all, in order for the message to have its intended impact, some one has to hear it. And in order for that to happen, someone has to preach it (Romans 10:13-17). That still remains the task of the church as long as there are people who still need to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ.

V. CONCLUSION

Throughout the ages, the book of Romans has had a revolutionary effect on lives. Not only did it transform Martin Luther, his passion helped provide the impetus that sparked a spiritual revolution through the Protestant Reformation. Likewise, Luther's teaching on Romans inspired John Wesley during a time of discouragement in his life, eventually leading to the Wesleyan Revival¹⁶.

Paul's Epistle to the Romans is still transforming people's lives, just the way it transformed Martin Luther and John Wesley. The one Scripture above all others that brought Luther out of mere religion into the joy of salvation by grace, through faith, was Romans 1:17: "The just shall live by faith." The Protestant Reformation and the Wesleyan Revival were both the fruit of this wonderful letter written by Paul from Corinth about the year A.D. 56.¹⁷

That transformational potential still resides in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Until Christ returns, the gospel will continue to be "the power of God for salvation" for everyone who believes.

NOTES

¹ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1988), 1863.

² Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 838.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Elwell and Beitzel 1988, 1865.

⁶ John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, vol. 2, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-), 436-437.

⁷ Elwell and Beitzel 1988, 1865

⁸ Walvoord, John F., Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary 1985, 437.

⁹ Andrew Knowles, *The Bible Guide*, 1st Augsburg books ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 565.

¹⁰ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the New Testament* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1997), 360-361.

¹¹ Hawthorne, Martin and Reid 1993, 839.

¹² Lane T. Dennis and Wayne Grudem, eds. *The ESV Study Bible*. (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2152.

¹³ Walvoord, John F., Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary 1985, 437.

¹⁴ David S. Dockery, Trent C. Butler, Christopher L. Church et al., *Holman Bible Handbook* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1992), 677.

¹⁵ Craig S. Keener and InterVarsity Press, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

¹⁶ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1996), Electronic ed.

¹⁷ Ibid.

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