

Paul, his message and the background – Romans 1

Paul wrote this letter not long after he wrote to the Galatian churches, almost certainly from Corinth in AD 58. He had written to the Galatians in either AD 54 or 57/58, but the big difference is that he had already visited Galatia 2 or 3 times, but he had not yet been to Rome – despite officially being a Roman citizen.

By this time, he had completed many of his travels with the good news of Jesus and had written many of his letters. He wrote this one to the believers in Rome, looking forward to going there and meeting them, taking the opportunity to set out in some detail ‘the whole purpose of God’ in writing, just as he had done in person for the church in Ephesus (**Acts 20:27**).

A parallel book is his short letter to the Colossians, another place he had not visited, which he wrote **from** Rome (under house arrest) about 4 years later. Colossians is highly intensive but Romans is more extensive, though he covers much of the same life-changing truth in each letter. We shall probably cross-refer to Colossians quite often as we progress through Romans.

Introducing himself and his message

Although Paul starts by introducing himself, he immediately defines himself by reference to the Lord Jesus Christ and the commission which he has received from the Lord. He declares his **own** credentials as a slave and apostle (‘sent one’) of Jesus the Messiah (**v.1**) and then re-affirms the Lord’s own credentials, declared (the Greek word almost means ‘defined’) as the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead, in accordance with the Holy Spirit – ‘the Spirit of Holiness’ (**v.4**).

Through whom, he says, he received grace and apostleship literally ‘into obedience of faith among all the Gentiles’ (**v.5**). That word ‘obedience’ is not slavish but an attentive listening and following. In other words, God gave Paul the grace to proclaim a message which resulted in genuine response and people coming to faith in Jesus . . .

‘. . . and you are examples of those who have believed, ‘called of Jesus the Messiah’ ’ (**v.6**)

And then Paul’s standard but nonetheless heartfelt greeting to all those ‘who are beloved of God in Rome, called saints’ – “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (**v.7**).

He has never met most of them ¹ but thanks God about them all because their ‘faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world’ (**v.8**)

He remembers them as he prays, and his prayer is that he might finally manage to get there to see them! As usual, his motivation is that they will be strengthened (literally ‘made solid’ **v.11**) and, of course, that they in turn will be able to encourage him (**v.12**). (Compare **Colossians 1:28**)

Paul wants to see ‘fruit’ – in other words, results from his proclamation of the gospel – among those in Rome, just as he has seen it among all the other non-Jewish centres that he has visited. He has a sense of debt to pass on the good news to **everyone**, educated

¹ But if you look in **Romans 16**, you will see that Paul already knew many who were there in Rome, close friends, relatives and fellow-workers, fellow-apostles and ‘fellow-prisoners’, though Paul had not yet been arrested.

Greeks, non-Greek Gentiles (not necessarily 'barbarians', but probably less educated and sophisticated), wise people and foolish people. No one is excluded and he wants to include those in Rome, too. (**v.13-15**)

This good news is effective and nothing to be ashamed of, bringing right relationship with God to every single one who believes, whether Jew or Gentile. It reveals God's gift of righteousness to those who respond in faith (**v.16-17**). (Compare Paul's message in Pisidian Antioch in **Acts 13:38-39**)

Which leads Paul straight on to look at:–

The state of the whole world system without God

Having just written about the righteousness of God, Paul contrasts that with the ungodliness and unrighteousness of the whole human system . . .

By suppressing truth in unrighteousness (**v.18**). Perhaps these words 'righteousness' and 'unrighteousness' seem 'religious' or old-fashioned to us? They simply mean 'straight dealing' and the opposite, crookedness. VERY understandable in our present times!

What is known about God, says Paul, is evident (literally, 'it shines out!') because God made it evident. No-one has any excuse, because God's nature can be clearly seen through his creation (**v.19,20**).

Making a definite choice NOT to acknowledge God or thank him but, claiming to be wise, mankind embraced foolishness and plunged into idolatry (**v.21,22,23,25**).

The result was devastating – **God gave them up!**

- 1) He let them go into 'the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonoured among them' (**v.24**).
- 2) He gave mankind over to unnatural sexual perversions, both men and women (**v.26,27**).
- 3) He gave them over to 'a depraved mind', with the results shown in **verses 29-32**, because they refused to recognise and acknowledge God himself (**v.28**).

As we read 'them' in all these cases, perhaps it would be good to substitute 'us'. This is the natural human condition and we can see it in the present 21st century world just as clearly as Paul could see it in the 1st century.

'Although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practise such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practise them.' (**v.32**)

Now Paul has set the scene to unfold the amazing plan of God to have a people for himself. In the following chapters, we shall see this plan in more detail – and how we can be intimately involved.

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