

Notes on Romans 1—5

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The following notes on *Romans* are intended to assist people to read through the letter—a chapter at a time. They are not a commentary, or even a full outline of what is said in Romans but rather reflections that take the reader into what the book is saying. Many details are necessarily overlooked but the confidence and enjoyment of Paul in writing his letter are, I hope, conveyed.

Chapter one

1:1–7 Paul desired to introduce himself to the Roman church prior to a visit there. But Paul was nothing of himself; it was Christ and the gospel that constrained him. He was mastered by Jesus Christ, Son of God, and by the gospel by which true righteousness had come to the world.

Paul had not come readily to confess that Jesus was the Christ. It was not historical fact that finally convinced him but Christ himself. It was history, but came to him as grace. But now he recognised the resurrection as God's declaration—by the Spirit of holiness—that Jesus was his Son with power. It came to him together with the truth that he was set apart for the gospel—a servant and apostle of Christ.

1:8–17 He was called by God, and his work of announcing the gospel was with a view to others hearing that call. By his prayers and labour he hoped to discharge the debt he owed to the Gentile world. He himself had come into the faith as a 'rank outsider'—a stranger to God and enemy of his Son.

1:18–32 Paul could now see the whole world in a different light. He was no longer indignant about people 'lower' than himself but saw the Gentile world in the hand of God. They had made the choice to ignore the Creator and to lose themselves in the creation. But their 'freedom' to do as they pleased was actually a determination of God—with the purpose of bringing them to account and silencing their lie (cf. 3:19).

A prayer

Our Father God, your apostle has taught us to see the world through your deeds done in Jesus Christ. You have revealed, and are still revealing your righteousness, and your wrath. This world is the place in which you have raised your Son from the dead. It is the place in which we hear your call to belong to him. Father, grant us grace to live by faith in what you have done in the world. We are sure that your gospel is its only light and healing. Through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Chapter two

2:1–11 Paul saw no distinction between Jews and Gentiles—as regards being condemned, so he linked what he said about the whole world with what he said specifically to Jews. Jews had no grounds to be satisfied with themselves for they, together with Gentiles, knew that those who do wrong deserve to die. What their culture had hidden from them was that they did anything wrong. They misunderstood God's mercy in deferring His judgement as an approval of their present culture. Paul knew that the honour of being Jews did not insulate them from God's judgement. He also knew that if anyone—Jew or Gentile—sought him, they would find him.

The wise men had sought and found the infant Christ; the Syro-Phoenician woman received a blessing from Christ; lepers and publicans did too, and now many Gentiles were seeking glory, honour and immortality through turning to Jesus Christ—through Paul's ministry.

2:12–24 Both Jews and Gentiles would perish if they sinned—the Jews because they were under the law, the Gentiles because they had what the law required written on their hearts. Paul knew that Israel had set up God's covenant of mercy as a moral high ground from which they could correct others. In this way, they avoided the fact that they themselves constantly broke the law and had caused the Gentiles to speak ill of God because of their conduct.

2:25–29 Paul could no longer be fooled by people claiming status with God through being physically circumcised. He had included in the circumcision (or death) of Christ. He knew the personal cleansing of the cross and knew that this was what circumcision was all about. Because he now stood with Christ, Paul could distinguish between the revelation that God had given to Israel and the conduct of the people who had received it.

A prayer

Holy Father, you have not given us what our sins deserve. Rather, you have given us many privileges and many revelations. Forgive us because we have been presumptuous. We thought that our good times were what we deserved, and that what we knew was what we had discovered. All the while we broke your law, and thought it did not register with you and was not noticed in the world. Father, we confess that you have raised up a true people who do your will. They do not trust themselves but Christ. They are enabled by your Spirit and receive your favour. By your grace Father, I am such a one. Thank you, Father, for your wonderful gift. Amen.

Chapter three

3:1–20 Many who had grown up under Israel's culture could not understand the gospel because it seemed to be saying that God would be more glorified in their being evil than good, and some misrepresented what Paul said in order to wrongfully accuse him. But Paul stood firmly with the Old Testament. David had confessed his sin, and many Old Testament texts scattered through the Psalms and the Prophets were clear confessions of Israel's sin. His conclusion was that no-one could be justified by the prescriptions of the law, and in fact, the whole world had been silenced by God as Judge.

It was important that Israel, and the world, have a clear revelation of their sinfulness. God has given us this by presenting His Son to us—so that we could do to him whatever we liked. We killed Him. This was a constant theme when the apostles preached the gospel: not only Israel, but Pilate and the Gentiles together, killed God's holy child. Paul never forgot this revelation. He called himself ignorant, unworthy, the least of all saints, and chief of sinners. In his treatment of Christians he had revealed his hatred for Christ, and for God.

For a people thus quietened by the knowledge of their sinfulness, the next words are wonderfully healing. For Israel, or anyone, to speak of their own righteousness was unreal. But we may and must speak of a righteousness of God.

3:21–31 God's righteousness was revealed in coming to save his people. But his righteousness was also declaring his people to be in the right. He did this by setting them free from an awful slavery, and by a sacrifice of atonement. He did this in Jesus Christ—through his death.

What was required now was that the world live by complete faith in this Jesus Christ. The Apostle knew that there were no grounds for boasting anywhere. This agreed with everything that the Old Testament, properly understood, had revealed. What about all the Christians who were Gentiles? Would they have to become Jews? Paul quoted what was central to Jewish faith—God is one—to say, 'No!' God is God of the Jews and God of the Gentiles. He had always had one way in which people could come to him, and that was, by faith, and not by anyone establishing their own righteousness.

A prayer

Father, what can I say? Everything I have done is known to you, and I cannot avoid your gaze. But you have declared me righteous in your sight—through Jesus Christ. Everything now is utterly clean. You have not overlooked my sins, and you have presented Christ as a sacrifice for them. You are altogether right in all you have done. I cannot claim any virtue or privilege, but you are vindicated in fulfilling all you have been about in our world. I bless you for your wonderful gift! Amen.

Chapter four

4:1–8 There are some eighteen references to believing, having faith or trust, or having no distrust, or being fully convinced, in this chapter. Paul spoke about Abraham and David in order to shake Israel's confidence in her culture and practice. He wanted to show that their forefather was essentially a man of faith. Abraham's story in Genesis 15 had shown that the righteousness he had was credited to him because he believed in God's promise. In this respect Abraham was one with David who came later. So the righteousness or the standing with God that Israel's great forefathers had was not based on their godliness but rather on God's grace to them as ungodly people who needed to be forgiven.

4:9–12 Israel prided herself, too, on God's gift of circumcision to them. But this sign of the covenant was nothing for them to rely on because it was given to them as a sign of what Abraham already had through faith. No outward mark of faith in God could ever become, or should ever become, a basis of confidence—whether it is

circumcision or baptism or church attendance or commitment to Christ or devotion to religious duty.

4:13–15 Israel had been very aware of the inheritance that God had promised to them. Paul called it an inheritance of the whole earth. (Actually the promise to Abraham was that he would be a blessing in all the earth—which tells us a lot about how Christians will inherit the earth.) But Israel had come to believe that blessing would come to them, and through them to the whole earth, and establish them in the earth on the basis of their keeping the law. They had completely misunderstood God's gift to them.

4:16–22 God's promise to Israel concerning their inheritance was a gift of grace. It came to Abraham in that way; it came to David in that way. It was written into the very fabric of Abraham's life in the way in which his son was born—that is, when neither he or his wife were able to have children. It was clear to Abraham that the blessing of God was completely from God, and had come to him when he could make no contribution to it.

4:23–25 This was the thing that Paul wanted the Jews to treasure in their heritage. God had now brought his promise to a fulfilment through his Son, Jesus Christ—particularly through raising him from the dead. From now on, no-one should have any confidence in their own goodness, or any reliance on mere outward forms of religion, but trust in God alone to justify them.

A Prayer:

Lord, the history of you with your people has never given us reason to be confident in ourselves, but it has given us every reason to have confidence in you. Grant, our Father, that we may see your promises, and your grace, and the sureness of your work in Jesus Christ risen from the dead, and that we may turn from all false confidence in ourselves. Amen.

Chapter five

Israel had boasted about their relationship with God and the law (2:17, 23), but Paul had proclaimed another righteousness, which came by faith in Christ and through his blood. He had shown them that this was their true identity as children of Abraham—together with all who trusted in Christ and his resurrection. What did all this mean? He showed them other things of which to boast (or in which to rejoice) (vv. 2, 3, 11) and described a life no longer characterised by sin but by being proclaimed right with God.

5:1–5 Paul described the new life that belonged to those who trust in Christ for justification. The new relationship with God is peace—not just the absence of war but personal reconciliation. It is access to the riches of God's grace—as just described, and in anticipation of sharing God's glory. It is character building suffering—because in this justification, and peace and access and hope, God has been pouring his love into the hearts of his people—a love whose quality he must now describe.

5:6–11 It is proven love—proved on the anvil of our refusal to be his noble creation (weak), our rejection of him (ungodly), and our sinfulness. It was proved by Christ's

dying for us, and so, we fear no wrath and are confident in Christ who lives to secure this for us. In a word, we boast or rejoice in God. The same gospel that had shown Jew and Gentile to be equally under the power of sin has now created a people dynamically under the power of justification—not haters but lovers of God.

5:12–21 Sin and death has effected everybody (not just when the law was given). The whole race was in Adam—doing what he did and receiving what he received. If that one act could have been so potent for the whole race—bringing condemnation, how much more has the act of Christ been powerful for the whole race—bringing justification!

Paul knew abundant grace, he had received the gift of righteousness, and he lived. Sin had reigned—what terrors to remember it. Now grace reigns, said Paul. Though law was given to make the reality of sin more stark, grace now abounds more than ever sin did. Sin reigned by producing death. Grace reigns through righteousness—not as an end in itself (which righteousness had been for Israel) but to bring about eternal life. Everywhere, Paul was aware of the vast difference between what he had known as a Pharisee—but still under his sins, and what he now knew in Christ.

A prayer

Lord, you have set us free from the control of sin and death. We could not know this until you announced to us that our sins were forgiven and our life was now righteous in your sight. Even now, we can scarcely believe that we are loved with such a love. Lord, keep us in this faith that we may no longer expect life from ourselves and may delight in your Son whose saving righteousness is sufficient for all the race. Amen.