

Introduction and Foundation

Romans 1:1-17

January 23, 2011

The whole of Paul's letter to the Romans is filled with deep theological truth. It is the closest the Bible has to a systematic theology—an organized explanation of who God is and how He relates to us. Of course, the letter does not really fit that category, and writing a systematic theology was not Paul's intention. It was only as the church lived with the truths of the faith and thought about them for centuries that the need to put them together in a systematic way was discovered and the work done. Paul's concern was to address the house churches meeting throughout the city of Rome and see if he could help them live more faithful lives and depend more on the grace of God. As with all of his letters, Paul wrote to Rome to address a specific group of people in a specific situation.

Among Paul's letters, however, Romans is among the hardest to figure out why he wrote it. Paul wrote to Corinth to correct a church which was too accepting of sin in their midst and was full of arrogant conflict. Paul wrote to Ephesus to help them see beyond where they were and catch a glimpse of the greatness of God and the future He had for them. He wrote to the churches in the cities of Galatia to defend them against the Judaizers and to remind the churches that we are saved by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone and not by anything that we do (though this is a theme that runs through all of Paul's letters).

Because all Paul's other letters were written with similar specific needs in mind, it makes sense that

Romans was written for the same purpose. But more than all the others, it is difficult to tease that purpose out of this letter. For this reason there are many answers to this question. It seems to be, more than anything else, Paul's foundational teaching on the basics of the Christian faith, and so some take it to be a primer on Christianity for people who did not have the leadership of an Apostle. One theme that pervades the letter is the relationships among Jews, Gentiles, and God. At least one commentator has found reason for the letter in possible conflict between the Jews and Gentiles in the Roman churches.

Whatever Paul's reason for writing was, the church has always found this letter to be important and helpful for identifying and teaching the faith. Paul makes his grounding sure and he is very clear about the foundation for Christianity and what that means for what we are to believe and how we are to live.

Before he gets into all of that Paul identifies himself. Romans is also unique in that it is the only letter Paul wrote to a church he had not started or visited. Perhaps because of this, Paul's introduction in this letter was longer than usual. He went to great pains to identify himself as an Apostle, and also to identify the one Whose apostolic authority he carried. Look with me at his opening identification. "*Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God.*" (v.1) Paul identified himself with respect to Jesus and the gospel. It was for Jesus' sake that he was ministering. It was the gospel, and the gospel alone, that he sought to carry around the world that the kingdom of God might grow. Because the

gospel is so important to Paul's understanding of himself, he went on to identify it. He reminded his readers that it is grounded in the Old Testament where it was promised by the prophets. He reminded them that it is Jesus' gospel and He was declared to be God's Son by His resurrection from the dead, while in the flesh He is a descendant of king David. It is this Jesus, and no other, that has given authority to Paul to carry the message of salvation to those outside of the Jewish community that the Gentiles might learn the obedience that comes from faith in Jesus Christ.

We need to stop here for a moment. This last statement sounds like an odd one to us. There are many today who have a very hard time with Paul's call here. His characterization sounds odd to us, that he is calling, ". . . *the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.*" (v.5) Paul's insistence that salvation is only by the grace of God and is only found through faith in Jesus Christ is seen by them to mean that what we do does not really matter as long as we love God and trust Him for our salvation. Paul states here, however, that faith in Jesus Christ cannot be separated from obedience to His commands. We are not okay if we think we love Jesus and worship as we see fit, but are not in a church or otherwise fully obedient to Him. Jesus Himself said, "*Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me.*" (John 14:21) It is not the case that because we are saved by God's grace and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on our behalf we can do whatever we want. We have freedom in Christ, but it is not freedom to sin and fulfill our fleshly desires. It is freedom to be the people God created us to be and to live in loving and

open relationships with Him and each other. Faith grows obedience in us.

And yet this is just part of Paul's description of himself. He is among those appointed by God to call people to obedience by calling them to Jesus Christ. With this he has finished introducing himself. He has identified himself by identifying the God who sent him and the mission he was given.

Before he moved on to the body of the letter there was one more issue Paul wanted to address. He generally included a thanksgiving for the readers after the salutation, and this letter is no different. Paul is thankful for the spread of the news of the faith of the Christians in Rome. Rome was the largest city in the world at the time with a population around one million. It was the center and seat of power of the Roman empire. It was also famous for its sin and debauchery. The roman emperors were examples of the axiom about power and corruption. Yet Christians all over the empire were aware that there were Christians meeting in Rome. There was a church there faithfully living out their call and calling the people of that city to faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul kept them in his prayers. He always remembered Christians all over the world when he prayed, and the people meeting in houses across Rome to pray and praise God were no exception. Yet he did not only pray for their faithfulness and strength. Paul also prayed that he might get to visit them. Along with all the other things that make this letter different, this is the only letter Paul wrote to a church he had neither founded nor visited. It seems he had met a number of Christians from Rome, so he knew some of them, but he had not

been to Rome. This letter would have to serve the purpose of teaching them the most important things he had to say until he could get there.

Paul was looking forward to the visit to provide mutual support. He wrote, *“I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith.”* (vv.11,12) He had things to teach them that they needed to know. He also wanted to be encouraged and strengthened by this body of believers that were living and witnessing in the heart of the empire. Outside of Jerusalem they were perhaps in the most danger. They also had some of the most potential for impact as they were able to witness to those in the halls of power. Paul wanted to win souls for the Savior in Rome even as he had in many other cities. He wanted to preach the gospel in Rome.

Which brings us to the main focus of the letter. For Paul it was all about the gospel. The gospel is not just the foundation for this letter, it was the foundation for Paul’s life. It drove everything he did. Look with me at what he said about it in verses 16 and 17. *“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”* We could do a whole series of sermons just on these two verses. Paul’s letter to Rome uses these truths as a starting point. From this statement Paul is going to carefully unpack an argument that we are all in the same condition and situation before

God, whether we are Jewish, Greek, or barbarian. It does not matter what our origins are. All that matters is the gospel and the impact it has had on us.

Then, as now, the world sought to make those who believed the gospel of Jesus Christ ashamed of it. It makes no sense from a human perspective that God’s Son would die on the cross on behalf of sinners and that God would accept that shed blood, and only that shed blood, for the sinners’ forgiveness. The lie that all people have believed is that we must work for our salvation. The message of the gospel is not only that nobody is good enough, it is that nobody can be good enough to earn a place in God’s presence. The world finds that insulting and judgmental and will not accept it. Only God’s grace, acting on our hearts, will drive us to our knees before Him. Whether it was the Jews before whom the church taught a crucified Messiah, or the Greeks before whom Paul taught resurrection from the dead, the world sees the gospel as a foolish belief.

Today, science has pitted itself against the gospel. The more deeply scientists look at the world, the more incredible and amazing it becomes. From the complexity of the sun and its interaction with the earth to the sheer immensity of the universe (it turns out Luis Giglio has only scratched the surface in his wonderful presentation), the universe is far grander than we imagined just a generation ago. The human body and life in general are also showing themselves to be far more complex and intricate than we knew. The gospel tells us that these things are all evidence of the power and creativity of God, and they make us marvel with the Psalmist that He takes notice of us at all. Yet there are

scientists who say that such a position is foolish and that the size and complexity of the universe argue against the existence of God. Instead they say the world around us, the galaxy clusters, the galaxies in them, the star clusters in them, the planets that orbit around them, and even life itself in all its wonder and complexity are the result of unmeasurably small and random fluctuations and perturbations in the energy of the universe and millionth of a second after the big bang. To me, that makes less sense than the gospel and is harder to believe, but we are supposed to be ashamed if we don't believe it.

Church history and the examples of those who have not been perfectly faithful are also supposed to make us ashamed. From the Crusades, through the Inquisition, to the modern complaint that the church is full of hypocrites the world has adopted an intentionally ignorant attitude that misinterprets history and misunderstands the church and the gospel. They then take a position of presumed moral superiority, and they judge the church as unfit for them and seek to make us feel ashamed. Yet the church is not as wrong as they have led themselves to believe, and when the church has made mistakes, it is because of the sinful nature still in its members, not because of any other problem inherent to the church itself. There is hypocrisy in the church, but far less than is in the world. The difference is that the people in the true church recognize their moral inferiority and seek the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives to make them the people they want to be and they know God wants them to be. As we will see next week, and can see all around us, the people in the world

redefine morality and what should be done to match whatever they want to do at the moment.

Paul said he refused to be ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God unto salvation. It is only by submitting to God and the truth that we can be saved. Saying our sin doesn't matter doesn't make it go away or remove our guilt. Only the shed blood of Jesus can do that. Convincing ourselves that we are better than God or that He doesn't exist won't make us better. It makes us worse because as we live we learn that we are powerless to change ourselves. Only belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ can provide the things we truly need and make us better.

This is because it is in the gospel that God's righteousness is revealed. If we are to be right. If we are to be in right relationships with God and each other, the only way is by faith in God. As Paul pointed out, God's righteousness has always been by faith, from first to last. Even under the Old Covenant, when sacrifices were being made for sin, Habakkuk was able to contrast the wicked with the righteous by saying, "*See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright—but the righteous will live by his faith.*" (Habakkuk 2:4) We will either admit that God exists and has the right to tell us how to live, or we won't. We will either submit to His will and obey His commands, or we won't. In each case, the former is the only way to life and righteousness. The latter leads to death, as we will see over the next several weeks.