

Romans-by Rick Stark

Chapter 1

Power of the Gospel. Like Jules Verne's 1864 classic *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, Paul's Letter to the Romans takes us to "the heart of the gospel" (16-17). First, it's good news, like light shining into the darkness... so "good" that that's the only way Paul wishes to identify himself: "in" Christ Jesus our Lord, the grace of His calling and posture in the *mission dei* to the nations (1-6). What about my identity? Second, see how this compels Paul (8-15) to long to visit Rome, for a powerful gospel transformation has made landing there, too. (transformation as a new obedience by faith, in faith... or "*the explosive power of a new affection,*" Chalmers) That's the gospel and Paul is not ever "ashamed" (16-17; "*the theme of this epistle and the essence of Christianity,*" Boice). Third, why is the gospel such good news? Because of such bad news (18-32; ch.2-3)! The gospel is a power encounter... God's righteousness over against unrighteousness: the hardness of human hearts trapped in and given over to idolatry, and for which the entire human race is helpless and only condemned to God's wrath. Note, too, the essence of sin: idolatry – replacing God, elevating and honoring anything including self as God, looking to and depending upon and demanding that such would to man what only God can give. How is it that the gospel is still "good news" for you today?

Chapter 2

Sin – No excuse. The "bad news": personal and pointed (biting) applications of God's righteousness judgment and wrath against sin (1-5). Why? Because our tendency is to suppose that the problem only lies with everyone else, but not me! Whether non-religious (1-12) or religious (17-29), our default mechanism is to judge others and "excuse" ourselves, the very definition of hypocrisy and presumption. But God shows no partiality in His judgment because His standard is always the same for all (6-11; perfect conformity and obedience to His righteousness, holiness and truth revealed in both natural and special revelation); and sin is always the same for all (12-16; rebellion against and/or failure to live out His standard); and the penalty for sin is always the same for all ("*wrath and fury*"). The apostle makes the case for "*all toot and no fruit.*" Knowing about God and belonging to Him (living in His righteousness, living unto Him for His glory and pleasure) are two different things. The outward rote and ritual of religion (or pagan morality) betrays the inward heartlessness, proving Paul's point of "total depravity" and the need of a true inward circumcision by the Spirit. "*O Lord, I shut my mouth, for my own hypocrisy magnifies my presumption upon You, myself and others.*"

Chapter 3

Justification by Faith. Ah the squirm, trying to justify oneself out of the bad news. One might understand if a Jew, having read ch.2, might push back, asking "*No advantage? Were the Jews, then, just a cruel foil on the world stage? The past millenniums of covenants and promises for naught?*" Not at all. God is just (1-8). Privileged with the Word of God, brought close to the truth of God and reality... God even used their sin and unfaithfulness to be a mirror of illumination of His righteousness and faithfulness to the world! But better off than others? "*Have you not been paying attention?*" says Paul, as he dismantles any such religious justification (9). In fact, evidence from their own Book holds all (religious and irreligious) accountable before God: not justification but the knowledge of sin and inability in unrighteousness (10-20). What hope, then? How can one be justified before God if it's not my own religious and/or moral performance (21-31)? A different kind of righteousness, that of Another: the righteousness of God which comes to us, for us (Jew & Gentile) as a gift in Christ Jesus and received by faith alone. Not my performance but His; not my righteousness but His. In this; God as both just and justifier of the one who has faith. This is the good news! G.R.A.C.E – God's riches at Christ's expense. Religious or ethnic boasting? NOT! "*My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.*" (Edward Mote, 1834)

Chapter 4

Abraham's Proof. The boasting Jew might hum a tune, "My hope is built, on this I stand, it is only because of Abraham." Take a moment to reflect on how we do the same, only replacing Abraham with some other ground of self-justification. But the lesson in Abraham (1-8) dismantles any notion of salvation (justification) by works-righteousness. Rather, it is salvation (justification) thru faith (a declared righteousness from God as a gift on the basis of faith in Christ). Practically speaking, we find here the importance of Scripture interpreting and confirming Scripture. Paul does the same citing David (Ps.32:1-2), but from a different angle; thus a sure, two-sided blessing to all who are, by faith, in Christ just as Abraham and David. But our inclination is, "Surely there's got to be more than faith, right? Maybe circumcision (baptism, membership, other religious rites)? Not. Look again at Abraham (9-12). Why is this important? "...in order that the promise(covenant, salvation) may rest in grace" without limits to all thru faith in Christ, Jew and Gentile (13-17). What does such "faith" look like? Back to Abraham... the nature and object of faith (18-24; "fully convinced that God was able..."). For all tired of jumping thru hoops or fighting the "compare/despair syndrome," the Good News is simply that you can't but He can and did and will. Turning in trust, dependence and hope in what God did in Christ on your behalf... that's the only faith that saves.

Chapter 5

Benefits of Free Grace. A children's song goes, "Count your blessings, name them one by one; count your blessing, see what God has done"? Having dismantled any self-justification, Paul reflects now upon the many benefits of being at once and for all united to Christ (1-5): justification, peace, access and assurance of grace, joy of hope, and suffering's gifts (endurance, character, hope, shamelessness, extravagant love). Spoils only to the strong? Nope. *Did we not learn from Abraham, ch.4?* A gift only to the weak and helpless, even those who were once at war with God (6-11). Now that's Good News – the substitutionary, penal sacrifice of Christ that brings reconciliation with God and eternal life. Overwhelmed? Absolutely! Rejoice, for what other response could you otherwise imagine? Free grace, yes; but never forget it was costly for Christ's (12-19). The problem was/is mankind's condition before God – united in Adam to sin and death (like being tied to an anchor thrown overboard). The solution is to be united to Another, the 2nd Adam Jesus Christ, who at every point where Adam (we) did it wrong, He obediently and fully did it right... and more! Maybe you recall a veteran's bumper sticker – "All sacrificed some; some sacrificed all." But for the Christian, there's only One who lived it all and sacrificed it all, once and for all, in the war for righteousness over sin: payment for sin's just penalty, freedom from sin's power, and ultimate victory over sin's presence. Yes, yes... that's the good news of the gospel.

Chapter 6

Union with Christ. Thus far, Paul has made it clear that it is the awareness and predicament our sinful estate that magnifies our need for the all-sufficient grace of God in Christ Jesus. But to what effect, more sin for more grace? Preposterous! The gospel announces that Christ has dealt with the principle (law) of sin, both its penalty and also its power: that grace might rule and overrule in righteousness (newness of life) in every sphere of man's existence (1-4; 5:20-21). But I still sin... ugh! Just as in 1 Cor.5:17, we are to reflect upon the fact that what has begun in our union with Christ (repetitive use of past tense juxtaposed with the present tense) now means not only living anew in Him, but that our old ways of sin was crucified (and being crucified) with Him. By grace thru faith, we were "in" His death (baptized = identified with); likewise, we are in His resurrection resulting in a new life. Sin has lost its death grip on me! (5-11) The jail cell door is opened; I'm free from the sin's dominating dictates (slavery)... but I must choose to walk out into that freedom (12-14). Before, there was no choice but only slavery to sin, but now there's a new freedom that is

expected (15-19). To what end? Not the bitter fruit of disappointment, brokenness and death, but freedom to righteousness as the way of life (20-23).

Chapter 7

Abiding Struggle with Sin. Sometimes, beginning with the end in mind is the best thing – “victory through Christ our Lord!” (25) Actor Telly Savalas (Kojak, '73-'78) frequently quipped in a rather cocky way, “*Who’s your daddy?*” To the criminal he was chasing, he meant “*Who owns you? Who do you belong to now?*” That’s Paul’s question here, a real struggle especially for the Christian. To belong to the Law (married and living under its requirements) only consigns us to powerless slavery to the sin and condemnation. But to belong to Christ is freedom (Gal.5:1): union with Christ in His death means we are no longer bound to what the Law consigned us to, and in His resurrection we belong to Another – a new Master and a new life (progressive righteousness made experiential by the Holy Spirit, 1-6). But one can’t blame the Law of God; it was our sin. The Law is good, for how else would we have known about God and about our predicament or pressed in our need for Christ? How else, except by God’s Word, would we be able to identify and name the deep war within your own soul – “flesh vs. Spirit”? Call it what it is – a messy struggle (7-24; see Paul’s personal example). But now in Christ, knowing who I am in Christ changes everything! (25)

Chapter 8

Life in the Spirit. The apostle Paul now answers an important question: How does the believer actually experience “*victory in Christ*” amidst the conflict within (7:21-25)? No doubt the invisible principle (law) of sin and shame whispers, haunting and taunting like a rogue deputy: “*consigned, condemned.*” But there’s a new Sheriff in town – the Holy Spirit – sent from heaven by the Father and Son to continually declare over all the voices: “*No condemnation! Freedom!*” On what basis? Only this: At every point where man does it wrong, Christ alone did it right... all the requirements of righteousness on our behalf, to which God is now pleased in claiming us as His own. Now, for all who have been reclaimed (*born of the Spirit*, Jn.3:1-8), who earnestly desire to walk in the light, power and fruit of the Spirit, for these the Holy Spirit can rule and overrule our hearts and minds and lead us into a new life of practical righteousness as we’ve never known it (1-17). Practical? Yes! Check it out: overcoming fear in killing the giants (12-17); a patient hope midst a yet-to-be-renewed world (18-25); help in praying differently about the future (26-30); and deep assurance that it’s the strength of His grip, not mine, that makes the difference in all the difficult challenges of this present life (31-39).

Chapter 9

God’s Sovereign Choice. One has to appreciate Paul’s agony here (wish it were true of me!): at once saying “nothing shall separate us from the love of Christ” (8:39), yet it appears his own people, Israel, have been cut off (1-5). Betrayal by God? Never! Not a chance! His covenant promises of salvation always and only were given to the “children of Abraham” – those of the “faith” of Abraham, meaning and not merely an “ethnic” Israel (6-8), and who came to be by the unfolding of God’s sovereign choice (election; 9-13). But what of the others? History is not a cruel hoax, and were it not for God’s sovereign mercy, none would have the assurance of God’s fidelity and salvation (13-18). The pushback here is not confined to an ancient people, but rather relevant today and requires a credible defense (19-29). That God is God is really “nuff said,” and the “what if” proposal of Paul, of which he draws from the ancient prophets, pulls back the eternal curtain, affording a glimpse of God’s sovereign ways. You see now, there’s a grander, more majestic plan orchestrated by God from beginning to end: to accomplish salvation for a “*remnant*” – those who have responded in faith to God’s only remedy, that alien righteousness imputed to the unrighteous on the merits of Christ, for the Jew and beyond... to the Gentile (30-33).

Chapter 10

Proclamation of the Gospel. Was Augustus Toplady reading ch.9-10 as he wrote the hymn “*Rock of Ages*”? “*Not the labors of my hands, can fulfill thy laws demands; could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow, all for sin could not atone; thou must save and thou alone.*” Likewise, Paul has no disdain over unbelief but rather only prayer and pleading for their salvation! (1-4; each of ch.9-11 begins the same) May that be true of us! Why don’t they believe? It’s not because God’s promises have failed, but because the Jews (as all mankind) are bent on chasing a salvation based on good works (self-righteousness). There are two kinds of righteousness: man’s and God’s. Man’s can never justify nor save himself because he can measure up to God’s standard of righteousness and holiness (3-5). Pride blinds and hardens, refusing God’s gift of an imputed righteousness on the basis of faith (5-13). Why faith? It is the only response that recognizes one’s need and does not add anything to the cross of Christ. Paul describes saving faith as a whole-self response – *mind, heart, and will*– to the message of the gospel (8-13). Have you responded to the gospel? If so, the promise of salvation is yours, now and forever! This is the really, really good news that our “*beautiful feet*” are to proclaim everywhere we go (14-17). Is “*show ‘n tell*” on your agenda today? It’s been God’s agenda, Paul argues, since your hero, Moses (18-21).

Chapter 11

Gospel Hope for Israel. The echoes reverberate through ch.9, 10, and now ch.11: “*How can we believe in the eternal security of the Christian (ch.8) if, as we can clearly see, Jews as a whole are not responding and being saved? If God has rejected Israel, will he possibly reject us?*”(James Boice) Building on arguments 1-3 which Paul began in ch.9, he now underscores very clearly that God’s historic, redemptive purposes toward the Jewish nation has not failed because... #4, some Jews (*Paul as an example*) have believed and are being saved (1); #5, this has always been the case, that even in the worst of times a remnant has been saved (2-10); #6, the salvation of the Gentiles now occurring is meant to arouse Israel that some might be saved (11-24); #7, in the end all (*true*) Israel will be saved and thus God will fulfill His promise (25-32). But how might this apply to the 21st century Gentile Christian? First, we should be encouraged in our evangelism. Second, we should be warned against spiritual presumption. Third, we should put all our hope and confidence in God, who alone is the Source, Accomplisher, and Sustainer of salvation. Fourth, we should never embrace anti-Semitic attitudes or actions. Finally, live in and stand under the doxological and mysterious and majestic world and life view (33-35).

Chapter 12

Marks Of The Gospel. Today I opened the inside cover of Boice’s Commentary– Romans 12-16, only to find this inscription: “*DaD, ove I YOU! Haveange out christmous with M, love calyoline.*” Reading this again (written 17 years ago), how would one expect *me* to respond? My heart pounding in love and devotion, I say “*Well... I’d jump a tall building, scale a mountain, give my very life for her!*” That’s Paul’s turning point to the entire Epistle (1-2) in view of the limitless, irresistible, unchangeable, transforming, world-altering love and mercy of God in Christ toward us who believe. But how should this change us practically and daily? First, in sincere humility in how we see and understand ourselves, and in the way we practice our spiritual gifts and callings (3-8). Second, in the way we love and serve one another (9-12; how vivid, “*out-do one another in showing honor*”). Third, in the way we relate and respond to the world around us, even when opposed or threatened (13-21). The apostle had to “urge, appeal” the Roman church in this because it doesn’t come naturally. This is the supernatural gospel overflow in the Christian’s life – “*life more abundantly*” (Jn.10:10). This turned the Roman Empire upside down. May that be true in Decatur, Alabama!

Chapter 13

A Civic Gospel. Christ is King – a new kingdom – and we now “march to the beat of a different drummer.” How does that work in the civic sphere? What do we owe government authority or community relationships? As to authorities, no doubt there are many relevant questions about “What is legitimate authority?” or “What are limits of Christian obedience?” for which Paul does not answer. But there is a helpful hint in the word for “authorities” – “*exousia*,” governing power of God, delegated by God and responsible to God for its legitimate use (Jn.19:10-11) rather than *kratos*, a naked power of rule exercised for good or evil. Above all, Paul is clear: God is sovereign King over all (*krato* sand *exousia*); He has appointed earthly authority (*exousia*) for our good and society’s order; and we are to submit to them as unto God (1-7). But absolute obedience even when tyrannical and immoral? By implication (“*honor to whom honor is owed*”), Paul takes his cue from Jesus (Matt.22:17-21), underscoring the principle of absolute honor and allegiance first and only to God. And now, how does “Christ as King” work in the community? We owe those beside us “*love*,” pure and simple – the guiding principle governing all our relationships (8-10). But what might be a powerful enough motive in the civic sphere? The return of Christ, to whom we must give an account (11-12). One more thing: don’t leave home naked – it’s dangerous. Put on Christ daily like the putting on of clothing... get dressed today like you mean it.

Chapter 14

The Law of Love. So how what does the “law of love” (13:8) work itself out? From broad scope to personal, now Paul continues with more specific gospel applications in the interpersonal relationships within the body of Christ: namely, love’s wisdom in discernment over potential divisiveness and then, supporting others even when do not share the same convictions on non-essentials of the faith (1-12). Instead of focusing on personally living to the glory of God or upon winning the lost, Paul says these who are *mature* in faith waste time finding fault among the *less mature*. These who are “*strong*” really do not trust what God might be doing in other Christians. Neither *legalism* nor *license* is the answer, but the principles of love: **Acceptance**; Allowance for God’s sanctification process in one another’s lives; **Avoidance** of harsh judgment in disputable matters. Now there’s a “*triple A*” rating of gospel life! Each stands accountable to the Lord; each’s motivation is always to honor the Lord. But “*there is to be no discrimination in respect of confidence, esteem, and affection.*”(John Murray) The guiding goal of love? **Never** let your preferences or convictions become a stumbling block to others’ faith; **Neglect** not the things that make for peace; **No** reason ever to act in any preferences or convictions except as by faith (13-23).

Chapter 15

Global Glory. Paul sums up the “*law of love*” here, which is simply the gospel life, the logical response to the gospel (“*therefore*,” Rom.12:1): bear up one another, build up one another (1-7). Both require a selflessness and a sacrificial heart. Hmm... like Jesus! It’s the “*golden rule*” with a vertical twist: “*Do unto others as Christ has done for you!*” This is the way we may please and glorify God (Jn.17:20-23). Anything less is pure hypocrisy and an obfuscation of Christ and his work on behalf of both Jew and Gentile (8-13). Don’t be surprised; be jealous (in a good way)! Paul underscores again that this was the plan of God’s magnified mercy from the very beginning, explaining (as Christ himself did) from the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms (Lk.24:44). This is the one and only message the whole world needs – it’s a global thing, global glory that God is after (18-32). And so now we may get our hands around the whole of Paul’s letter to the Romans – “*to infinity and beyond*” (Buzz Lightyear). Paul is committed to get the gospel to the farthest reaches of the known world – Spain. How might be the best way to get the church of Rome to buy in to the vision? Explode their hearts with the depth and height and breadth and glory of the gospel itself. The rest – encouragement and support for the mission (22-24) – will be the natural overflow of the gospel. This is a proven pattern everywhere Paul goes: when God opens people’s hearts, people in turn open their wallets (26-27). In the end, to everyone’s joy and God’s glory!

Chapter 16

What's In A Name? Thirty-three personal names... count them, pronounce them, contemplate them, one by one. Twenty-four of these were in Rome. Nine were in Corinth. There are two unnamed women and an unspecified number of unnamed men. Superfluous details in this last chapter to an otherwise magnificent Epistle? Hardly! Paul was not merely a theologian who's head was in the clouds, but an apostle to the people, people he never forgot. So let's not go too far with some bifurcation: "*task oriented or people oriented; intellectual or relational*" ... "*so heavenly minded he's of no earthly good*"? Not so in the gospel. Now what about Phoebe? The word here can be understood broadly as "*servant*" or specifically as "*deacon*" (1 Tim.3:1). Only context can determine and this text is not decisive. What is clear, however, is Paul is more concerned with normal Christian behavior and function... about being servants of others, as Jesus was, rather than a badge of particular office. Phoebe is a beautiful model and all women should be likewise positioned for service in a variety of ways. Every Christian, according to one's faith, gifts and spiritual maturity, is to find their place of service. Now, what is the next most repetitive word besides the personal names? "*Church,*" used 5 times, along with other descriptive words like "*brothers, sisters, saints, fellow workers, friends, mother*"... all those who are in the Lord. The church is to be one large and very caring and connected family... and it's worth fighting for against any sabotage the evil one might try (17-20). May gospel benedictions strengthen us in all obedience to the gospel and the glory our great God (25-27).

-Reflecting on Romans-

Before moving on to our next book of the Bible, take some time today to reflect on what we've read in Romans. Perhaps re-visit a favorite chapter or an especially meaningful passage. Or read the beginning chapter(s) again, now that you've read the whole. Or go back to a part of the book that struck you as curious and see if it makes more sense now. Or speed-read the whole thing again, seeking to reinforce its main themes. Or... perhaps you need a catch-up day to finish Romans before we move forward?

"My son, be attentive to my words; incline your ear to my sayings. Let them not escape from your sight; keep them within your heart." Proverbs 4.20-21