

# "ROMANS" AN INTRODUCTION (Chuck Swindoll)

Travel back in time with me. Let's go back to the winter of AD 57. We're at a narrow land bridge between mainland Greece and the Peloponnese, where a Roman city rakes in fortunes from heavy-laden ships and cash-heavy tourists. Outside the city, in the home of a wealthy and hospitable Christian named Gaius, two men discuss a scroll. One paces the room, pouring out his thoughts to the other, who sits at a large table taking copious notes.

The speaker walks with a deliberate strength, although his shoulders are rounded and a noticeable hitch interrupts his gait. His arms and face bear the marks of wind, sun, age, and mistreatment. His fingers are knotted and curled and fused at an unnatural angle, a telltale sign of stoning. You would expect that a body such as this would contain a broken, demoralized spirit, but the eyes reveal something different. They flash with energy and sparkle with the optimism of a teenager about to get his driver's license.

The city is Corinth. The one pacing the floor is Paul; his amanuensis at the table, Tertius. The document they are preparing will eventually become the apostle's letter to the church in Rome, the most significant piece of literature the Lord would ever commission His most prolific evangelist to write. Little does Paul or anyone else realize the impact it will have throughout the centuries to come. From Origen of Alexandria in the third century to Barnhouse of Philadelphia in the twentieth, countless theologians will pen innumerable pages of exposition and meditation on the apostle's magnum opus. Augustine will find the seed plot of his faith in this letter. This document will spark a revolution in the heart of Martin Luther, who will reintroduce the truth of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone—a doctrine all but obscured by the dogma of men who stood to profit from a false gospel of works. It will ignite the mind of Jonathan Edwards, strangely warm the heart of John Wesley, and fuel the revival fire of George Whitefield.

## "CALLED AS AN APOSTLE, SET APART FOR THE GOSPEL OF GOD" (1:1)

Paul's journey to this place and time had been anything but predictable. Though born in the cosmopolitan hubbub of Tarsus, Paul matured in the shadow of the great temple in Jerusalem. Within its enormous, gleaming white walls, he learned at the feet of the famous rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). Though a Roman citizen (Acts 22:25-28), Paul was first and foremost a son of the covenant. He heard of the great privileges and responsibilities God had given his kindred people. He studied the Law of Moses and devoted himself to fulfilling every tradition to the letter. And he immersed himself in the rituals of the Pharisees with a singular goal in mind. He wanted to become like the temple itself: sacred, strong, undefiled, a worthy vessel for the righteousness of God.

But, as often happens in the lives of great men, Paul's zealous pursuit of righteousness took an unexpected turn. While Paul was on the road in order to silence and persecute Christians, Jesus Christ confronted him, rebuked him, changed him, and then set him on a whole new course (Acts 9:3-22). The righteousness he



coveted could not be found in the traditions of the Pharisees but in the faith of the very people he sought to kill. These people would show their former persecutor supernatural grace, first by embracing him—the man who had stood back and watched the stoning of their beloved Stephen (Acts 7:58-8:1)—and then by showing him the source of their goodness (9:13-19). They were merely demonstrating the righteousness they had received by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul's encounter with the risen Christ transformed him. His future lay not in Jerusalem and works of the Law, but out among the Gentiles, preaching grace and living by faith. Instead of stamping out Christianity, he would become a tireless apostle, traveling more than twenty thousand miles over the course of his journeys and proclaiming the gospel wherever ears had never heard it. Then, near the end of his third missionary journey, after what many would consider a full life in ministry, the apostle looked westward to the frontier beyond Rome (Rom. 15:24).

### **"FULL OF GOODNESS, FILLED WITH ALL KNOWLEDGE AND ABLE ALSO TO ADMONISH" (15:14)**

Paul had long admired the congregation in the capital city. Although he had neither founded the church nor even visited them, he shared close connections with several leading members (16:1-15). Many had been his partners in ministry, some were his cell mates in the early days of evangelism, and several were the fruit of his labors in other regions. Their obedience to the Word and faithfulness to one another had become legendary among the other churches (16:19). This could not have been easy, given their unique pressures in Rome.

During the reign of the Emperor Claudius (AD 41-54), the Roman government—normally tolerant of other religions—began to prohibit proselytizing. Claudius very likely expelled the Jews from Rome (Acts 18:2) because Jewish Christians had been evangelizing their neighbors. But within a few years Claudius was poisoned, and his adopted heir, Nero, allowed Jews and Christians to return. After reestablishing their district, the Jewish community undoubtedly pressured Christians to keep a low profile to avoid more trouble. For the first three years of Nero's reign, all was quiet. The teenaged emperor was too occupied with threats within the palace to notice much going on outside. It was during this time that Paul wrote to his brothers and sisters in the capital city. Within a few months, however, Nero would eliminate the source of internal danger by poisoning his mother. Then he would turn his attention to winning the hearts of Roman citizens with grand festivals and massive gladiatorial spectacles.

At the time of Paul's writing, the population of Rome exceeded one million inhabitants, about forty percent of whom may have been slaves or former slaves. And, like modern metropolitan centers, Rome was a wonderful place to live for the elite but challenging for everyone else. The divide between the rich and the poor constantly kept city officials on edge because the lower classes were never far from rioting. Most of them lived amid rampant street crime in squalid high-rise apartment buildings as tall as five or six stories, with no sanitation or water available above the first floor.

The great divide between the picturesque villas of the privileged and the crime-ridden slums that comprised most of the city left the residents to fend for themselves, which they did by congregating according to ethnicity. In other words, first-century Rome was not unlike New York City during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Ethnic neighborhoods became governments unto themselves, vying for dominance while maintaining an uneasy peace with one another to avoid persecution by the government (see Acts 18:2).

Life was hard for everyone, but being a Christian in that environment made it even worse. For both Jewish and Gentile Christians, the price of discipleship often meant the loss of family and clan, including the safety these provided. They must have felt like squirrels living among angry giants, any one of whom

might decide to crush them on a whim. By AD 64, their feelings proved to be justified. Nero went mad. His persecution of the Christians became so shockingly brutal that citizens actually began to pity them. Some say the crime of the Christians that sent them to their deaths was the burning of Rome, but according to the Roman historian Tacitus, Christians were punished "not so much for the imputed crime of burning Rome, as for their hate and enmity to human kind."

While Nero's persecution lay several years in their future, this general impression of Christians—regardless of how people came by it—would factor heavily into the apostle's practical advice near the end of his letter.

### **"MAY THE GOD OF HOPE FILL YOU WITH ALL JOY AND PEACE IN BELIEVING" (15:13)**

The believers in Rome desperately needed encouragement, which this divinely inspired letter provided in three ways.

*First, the letter confirmed their understanding of the gospel and clarified what might have been confusing.* Persecution combined with isolation can cause even the most resilient mind to lose its grip on the truth. In careful detail and with compelling clarity, Paul explained the truth of the gospel. He drew upon his formal training and the best rhetorical style of the day to present the truth of God in logical sequence. He recalled his years of preaching in synagogues and debating in markets to answer every relevant objection. And, of course, the Holy Spirit inspired the content, superintended the process of writing, and safeguarded the document from error. The believers in Rome received a complete, comprehensive, and concise proclamation of Christian truth. And the effect must have been incredibly calming.

*Second, the letter affirmed the authenticity of their faith and commended them for their obedience.* People on a long and arduous journey frequently need confirmation that they are on the right course and should continue as they have been; otherwise, they grow discouraged and reduce their efforts or wander off course. The church in Rome had long been a model of steadfast faith and authentic community. Paul encouraged them, saying, in effect, "Keep doing what you have been doing. You're right on target!" Furthermore, the congregation in Rome, like every other church in the first century, was susceptible to the influence of false teachers. This letter equipped them to recognize the truth and to leave no room for heresy.

*Third, the letter cast a vision for the future and urged them to become Paul's partners in accomplishing it.* When churches take their eyes off the horizon, the inevitable result is what can be called a "survival mentality." Rather than accomplishing the plans of God to redeem and transform His creation, they forget their reason for being, which begins a long, agonizing slide into irrelevance. Irrelevant churches fret over inconsequential matters, nitpick their leadership, criticize one another, experiment with worldly strategies for growth, and chase vain philosophies. Meanwhile their surrounding communities hear little of Christ, and what they do hear is unattractive. Paul challenged the believers in Rome with an enormous undertaking: evangelization of the newly expanded empire to the west. It was a landmass greater than what the apostle had covered in three missionary journeys—and it was not nearly as tame.

### **"IN IT THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD IS REVEALED FROM FAITH TO FAITH" (1:17)**

Paul's letter to the believers in Rome can be called many things. Clearly, this became his magnum opus. It is the first systematic theology of the Christian faith. This letter may be considered the believer's constitution—the Christian Magna Carta. We might even call it a manifesto of the new kingdom, for it not only declares our essential beliefs but also establishes our agenda as Christ's disciples. But more than

anything, the words Paul and his amanuensis, Tertius, penned twenty centuries ago are nothing less than the Word of God. Through human agency, the almighty Creator has breathed out, revealing a grand plan.

"The plan of salvation" outlined in this letter to Christians living in first-century Rome has more than the rescue of individuals in view. The plan of God is more than a mere fire escape through which a few find safety from the flames of eternal punishment. This grand plan—of which all are invited to become a part—is nothing less than the Creator's intention to bring His creation back under divine dominion, to cleanse it of evil, to redeem, reclaim, and renovate the universe so that it might fully reflect His glory again. The plan of salvation is good news to each individual, but the greater news is the return of God's righteousness to its rightful place in the world. Someday, Christ will tear the veil between heaven and earth, and the righteousness of God will sweep the "prince of the power of the air" (Eph. 2:2) from his stolen throne and will again rule over creation. This future is inevitable because God's plan is unstoppable.

In the meantime, the righteousness of God lives in the hearts of those who have received His grace through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ. Therefore, each individual reading Paul's letter to the Romans must answer two questions. First, will you allow God's transformation of the world to begin with you? As Paul will explain, this is not an invitation to try harder, but a plea to submit to His grace before it's too late. Second, if the righteousness of God lives within you now, will you keep it hidden? If you lack knowledge, read on. The book of Romans will explain all you need to know. If you lack courage, this exhortation from an intrepid apostle to a beleaguered church in first-century Rome will revive and reinvigorate your confidence.

Whatever your situation, wherever you happen to be in your spiritual journey, I am convinced that the time you invest in a careful study of this letter will change you forever. This has been true of generations past, and the power of God's Word has not diminished over time. As you read, the Holy Spirit has pledged to provide whatever you lack. You need only believe His promise. If you submit to these truths, then you too will discover, as did Paul, "the righteous [one] shall live by faith" (Rom. 1:17).