

Reading Paul's Letter to the Romans

Key Historical Background to the Letter:

- The church in Rome was not started by Paul, though he knew many leaders there. The church was made up of Jews and non-Jews, and in the period from A.D. 49-54 all Jews were expelled from Rome by the Roman Emperor. When they were allowed to return years later, the Jewish and non-Jewish Christians had a difficult time co-existing peaceably. They disagreed about the exact meaning of the Gospel and how exactly to practice the life of following Jesus, especially in the area of religious customs and holy days.
- Paul's larger dream was to make the church in Rome a staging ground for the Gospel to spread further west to Spain and beyond (15:22-24). However, if the Roman Christians were divided between Jew and non-Jew, and could not agree on the meaning of the Gospel, Paul's mission would be compromised.
- Paul mission in the letter is to explain the Gospel about salvation through faith in Jesus. He especially highlights that Jesus is the culmination of God's relationship with Israel, and that the Gospel was always meant to spread beyond Israel to non-Jews. This is why he focuses so much on key Old Testament themes (Abraham, Torah, circumcision) and on the implications of the Gospel for the Jew/Gentile relationship.

Flow of Thought in Romans

1:1-15 (see also 15:14-33): Paul has not yet been to Rome, but writes the letter in the hopes that the city will become a staging ground for the Gospel to move further west.

1:16-17: The Gospel is all about God's justice and salvation for all people

1:18-32: God's wrath and justice oppose the sin and brokenness in the Gentile world

2:1-3:8: God's wrath and justice oppose the sin and religious hypocrisy of Israel, who should know better because they were given the Torah

3:9-20: All humanity, Jew and Gentile, is trapped in sin and selfishness

3:21-26: God's justice compelled him to send Jesus who would live, die, and be raised on behalf of all humanity, so that Jews and Gentiles would trust Jesus to save them.

4:1-25: God's plan has always been to include non-Jews into the family of the redeemed: salvation does not come by obeying the regulations of the Torah, but through faith in Jesus, which is open to anyone. Thus, the Gospel should result in a multi-ethnic family of the redeemed.

5:1-11: Because God's grace is revealed to everyone in Jesus, we can have assurance that God's love is more powerful than human sin and brokenness.

5:12-21: Salvation through Jesus places us in a new humanity: no longer are we in the broken sinful family of Adam, but in the forgiven and renewed family of Jesus, the new Adam.

6:1-23: Being in the new humanity, Christians can experience freedom from slavery to sin and really taste the life of the new creation in holiness and obedience

7:1-6: In Jesus, God's grace accomplished what the Jewish Torah could never do on its own

7:7-25: The Torah could not heal the broken human heart, in fact all it did was highlight and expose Israel's sin by their constant failure to obey

8:1-17: The new family of Jesus that is empowered by the Spirit can now truly obey the Torah through God's grace and transformed hearts

8:18-39: To live by the power of the Spirit is to participate in God's renewal of humanity and all creation

9:1-29: The tragedy of so many Jews rejecting their messiah should not surprise us. God's promise of salvation has always created division and opposition

9:30-11:10: Ethnic Israel became focused on Torah obedience and works-based religiosity, which resulted in the exclusion of non-Jewish outsiders from God's people

11:11-32: In Jesus God has included non-Jews into his new family, but he has not given up his covenant promises to Israel, somehow they will be saved

12:1-13:14: A multi-ethnic community of Jesus should have love, forgiveness, humility as their core values, so that they seek the well-being of their communities on behalf of the Gospel.

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14:1-15:13: When ethnic or cultural differences arise in a multi-ethnic church, we should discern between primary and secondary issues, and make grace and acceptance the foundation

15:14-33: Paul hopes to travel to Rome to make it a platform for the Gospel to spread further west, but he must first bring the Gentile offering to the poor Jews in Jerusalem.

16:1-23: Paul brings greetings to his network of friends and co-workers

16:25-27: Final summary and greetings

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