

Romans: Justification by the Obedience of Faith

By Steve Ray

Sweat was beading up on his bald head and thick eyebrows. His pointed beard wagged as he paced the stone floor speaking rapidly. His dark eyes flashed, his hands gesticulated in rhythm with his rapid utterance. His quick mind was obviously way ahead of the words that rushed from his mouth.

Tertius struggled to keep up, his quill scratching rapidly across the parchment. After hours of dictation and careful refinement this letter was rolled up and given into the hands of Phoebe who boarded a wooden merchant vessel heading for the hub of the Empire. The words were Greek, written from the Greek city of Corinth, dictated by a Jew of the Hebrew religion and sent to Latin Rome.



These rapidly dictated words would change the world forever. Twenty-eight years had elapsed since a seemingly obscure event in Palestine—the crucifixion of a Jewish rabbi named Jesus. At his execution the Roman governor had placed over his head a sign “King of the Jews” written in Greek, Hebrew and Latin. Almost three decades had passed; yet this one crucifixion out of

thousands—even tens of thousands—which would normally have been long forgotten was now being explained in such a way that the world would never be the same.

The bald-headed man was St. Paul—formerly Saul the Pharisee—and the scroll on its way across the Mediterranean Sea was the Epistle to the Romans. He was no mere theorist or dry academic but a man writing with an experiential passion formed by his profound conversion, study, suffering, and his preaching of the gospel over the Roman Empire.

It would be impossible to calculate the immense effect this precious cargo has had upon the world over the last two thousand years. Paul is an immensely practical man as well as a profound theologian. Few if any documents have so changed the course of human history and thought. It was Romans that brought about the conversion of the great St. Augustine and a misunderstanding of which—through the Augustinian monk Martin Luther—brought about the unfortunate Protestant Reformation.

The year was AD 58 Paul was in the city of Corinth in Greece and was planning a trip to Spain by way of Rome (Rom 15:22–24). He had many enemies whose slander and false teaching had preceded him. By way of introduction and a desire to instruct in the true religion, St. Paul was writing ahead to the Romans.

History indicates that St. Peter had already been to Rome and founded the Church there. According to early tradition passed down by Eusebius, Peter was in Rome during the second year of Emperor Claudius (AD 42). Paul said he “aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man’s foundation” (Rom 15:20). The Church in Rome was made up of both Jew and Gentile and Peter had established the Church. History is replete with references to Peter as the bishop of Rome and its founder.

Romans holds the honor of first and longest of the epistles in the New Testament canon. It is the most theologically developed of all the epistles, more of a treatise and less personal in nature.

“Most eagerly then did I seize that venerable writing of Thy Spirit; and chiefly the Apostle Paul. Whereupon those difficulties vanished away, wherein he once seemed to me to contradict himself, and the text of his discourse not to agree with the testimonies of the Law and the Prophets. And the face of that pure word appeared to me one and the same; and I learned to rejoice with trembling” (*Confessions of St. Augustine*, 7, 20).

The theme is stated early on: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom 1:16). The justification and salvation of Jew and Gentile is carefully detailed as Paul draws from natural law and the Old Covenant to explain the Gospel. In Romans Paul quotes from the Old Testament more than any other book and uses it so skillfully that it still amazes scholars and general readers alike.

Like Paul himself, many Jews had converted to the Christian faith which was seen simply as the fulfillment of Judaism. The Messiah had come not for the Jew only, but for the Gentiles as well. Many of these Jews insisted that all the Gentiles who were brought into this new faith must be circumcised, perform the Jewish ceremonies, and follow all 613 of the Mosaic laws. The Apostles and the elders gathered together in AD 49 (the first Church Council) and determined that the Gentiles could be justified before God not by following the details of “the works of the Law”—the Mosaic code—but by faith in Christ (see Acts 15).

Paul asks many poignant questions of his imaginary interlocutors. How was Abraham justified before God? Was it through circumcision or because he believed and obeyed

God? Was he justified as a Jew or when he was virtually an uncircumcised Gentile from Mesopotamia? Of course, Paul explains, Abraham was justified by faith and as an uncircumcised Gentile.

Much of Paul's argument revolve around this very point. Too bad that many have misunderstand Paul by divorcing the text from its historical context and asserting that good works or obedience play no part in the process of justification before God. Martin Luther unhappily wanted Paul to proclaim that justification came not by "the obedience of faith" (Rom 1:5; 16:26), or by "faith working through love" (Gal 5:6) but by "faith alone". To force this heretical interpretation upon Paul's writing, Luther was forced to add the word alone into the text which skewed Paul's meaning and helped bring about the Protestant Reformation.

In fact, the only place the words "faith" and "alone" appear together in Scripture is in James, who also speaking about Abraham said, "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? ... You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone" (Jas 2:21, 24). Faith and subsequent obedience to Christ, the obedience of faith, is the path to salvation and final justification.

Christ stands as the singular pinnacle in space and time and by his Incarnation, death and resurrection he has made atonement for the sins of the world. This merit of Christ is offered freely to all men regardless of ethnic origin or whether they are circumcised or not circumcised. One is not required to obey the laws of Moses to earn or inherit this salvation.



Rather, this gift of God is offered to us while we were yet sinners (Rom 5:8). This is the theological battle Paul is waging and Romans explains it systematically and deeply. And of course, when one believes in the Messiah and is baptized into his new Israel(the Church), that one is required to follow the law of Christ. The Old Covenant is not abolished; rather, it is fulfilled in Christ and Paul now commands believers to "present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship" (Rom 12:1).

After his theological explanation and defense of the gospel of grace in the first half of his

epistle, in chapter 8 Paul embarks on the second and practical section of Romans. He now exhorts the believers to a life of following Christ and living not in the flesh but in the Spirit.

In chapters 9–11 his amazing ability to reason and use the Old Testament scriptures are demonstrated when he argues that God has not abandoned the Jews now that the Gentiles have come into the Church. Rather, “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11:29). Paul argues that God will not abandon the Jews but will keep his promises to them and they will some day recognize and receive him as their Messiah. Christians must not be proud that their place in Christ for it is a gift, nor should they be arrogant with the Jew. They have been grafted into the tree and the tree is a Jewish tree of a Jewish root.

Paul proves his adept scholarship and use of the Old Testament in Romans by quoting from the Old Testament more in Romans than in all his other epistles combined. (At least seventy direct quotations from at least fourteen Old Testament books, predominantly Psalms and Isaiah.) Paul acts as a bridge between the Old and New Covenants preparing the way for Gentiles around the world and through the ages to come to Christ as Lord and Savior freely and by faith.

This indefatigable and self-sacrificing apostle eventually did arrive in Rome. And, during a second imprisonment this time not under house arrest but in the Mamertine Prison, Paul shed more than perspiration(he shed his blood. In AD 67, Paul was beheaded for the faith and together with Peter is buried in Rome—trophies of the Kingdom of God. Romans stands as a monument, immemorial, profound, passionate, the very breath of God penned by a Jewish scholar in a Greek city to the Romans in the year AD 58. Paul did not sweat nor shed his blood in vain.

Page: History of the Church, II, 13-15. 17. See Companion to Scripture Studies by Steinmuller.