

THE RIGHTEOUS WILL LIVE BY FAITH

Introduction to Romans

Key Verses: 1:16-17

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

Today we begin our study of Romans. We usually study one of the four gospels with our students when the school is in session. The gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) teach us about Jesus’ life and mission by giving us the snapshots of various events of his birth, his ministry, his death and his resurrection. It is good to study the gospel, hearing Jesus’ words directly from him. The epistle of Romans is a different way for us to study the gospel of Jesus. This letter presents the gospel more systematically. If the four gospels are like collections of newspaper articles of Jesus’ life and mission, Romans is a well-organized textbook that tells us about who Jesus is and what Jesus has done for us. May God help us to come to know our Lord Jesus personally as we study this letter!

I. WHO WROTE ROMANS, WHEN AND WHY?

The Apostle Paul wrote this letter (1:1) in the spring of 57 A.D., in Corinth during his third missionary journey (Ac 20:2-3). Paul had never been to Rome when he wrote this letter. Why would you write a letter to people you never met? All the other letters of Paul were addressed to the churches that he had planted and the leaders whom he disciplined himself. Even though Paul had never visited Rome, he knew personally some believers in the church. More importantly, Paul loved all of them, whether he met them or not, because they were his brothers and sisters in Christ. He was concerned about their spiritual wellbeing. He had planned many times to visit them to encourage them and share the word of God with them. But God had not opened a door for him yet (1:11-12). So he decided to write to them.

Paul was also eager to see Rome conquered by the gospel of Jesus. At that time, Rome was the center of the western world. There is a saying, “All roads lead to Rome,” meaning there are different ways to accomplish the same goal. This idiom originated from the intricate highway system that radiated from the city of Rome to all directions. Paul envisioned the day when the gospel of Jesus Christ would travel through the Roman roads. In fact, it had been Paul’s dream to go to Rome and preach the gospel there. While he was in Ephesus he planned to visit Achaia, Macedonia, Jerusalem, then go to Rome. He said, “After I have been there, I must visit Rome also” (Ac 19:21). But Paul sensed that something ominous would happen to him during his visit to Jerusalem. “And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish

the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace” (Ac 20:22-24).

St. Paul preached the gospel during a difficult period. Christians were persecuted everywhere for their faith in Jesus. But Paul did not give up the work of God. He had a great desire to proclaim the gospel. He had a sense of obligation to share the good news. He had a great world mission vision. As he was going through severe trials in Jerusalem, Jesus came to him and said: “Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome” (Ac 23:11). In Romans 1:11, Paul said, “I long to see you.” Again in 1:15 he said, “... I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome.” I pray that as we study this letter, we may also have a mission vision in our hearts, realizing that Paul’s vision came from knowing the broken heart of God for people who are dying because they don’t know Jesus personally.

II. WHAT ROMANS IS ABOUT

In his Preface to Romans, Martin Luther (1483-1546) called this letter “purest gospel.” He said, “It is well worth a Christian's while not only to memorize it word for word but also to occupy himself with it daily, as though it were the daily bread of the soul. It is impossible to read or to meditate on this letter too much or too well. The more one deals with it, the more precious it becomes and the better it tastes.” Some Bible scholars (W. Sanday and A.C. Headlam) call the letter a “testamentary epistle,” meaning that this letter represents Paul's personal testimony to his own faith. Paul wanted to share with the church in Rome what he knew to be the core of the Christian faith. Other scholars called Romans a “prophylactic epistle,” because Paul wrote it to stop the spread of an infectious disease—a false gospel. Paul saw how important it was for the church not become infected with false doctrines or corrupted by cultural disease. He really wanted to share the pure gospel with them in person. But he couldn’t wait. So he wrote them a letter to share the gospel.

At first glance, Romans seems very complicated and difficult to study, because its contents are so logically presented. Paul explains many important concepts such as sin, law, punishment, grace, faith, justification, love, flesh, spirit, hope, and so on. This letter is the treasure trove of Christian doctrines. But to simply put, it is a book about the gospel of Jesus Christ. We can summarize the whole epistle with the words from 1:17, “*The righteous will live by faith.*” This is the focus of our study this time.

Romans can be divided into four major parts. First, Chapters 1-8 set forth the gospel of Jesus Christ as the foundation of Christian faith. Second, Chapters 9-11 present God's redemptive purpose for Israel and Gentiles. Third, in Chapters 12:1-15:13, Paul deals with application of Christian doctrines to real life by discussing ethical problems in a culturally mixed community. Finally, in Chapters 15:14-16:27, Paul discusses his plans for future and shares his prayer topics and personal greetings.

We can also divide the book more broadly into two major parts: the foundations of Christian faith (Chapters 1-11) and the Christian life in practice (Chapters 12-16). Let us preview a couple of important themes of the letter today. The first is about sin. St. Paul declares that all of us are sinners (3:23). There are no exceptions. There is no one righteous, not even one (3:10). Paul himself was a very religious man. He was brought up as a Pharisee, meaning his whole life was dedicated to obeying God's laws and observing religious rituals meticulously. But he knew in his heart that he was a wretched sinner (7:24). It was impossible for him to observe all the laws all the time 100%. He knew that he was a condemned man because the wages of sin is death (6:23). Now, some of us may be offended when we are called sinners. "I am not a bad person," we may protest. Still, Romans declares that we are sinners before God. And we are in need of salvation from sin and death. Recently, a social media campaign called "the ALS ice bucket challenge" raised more than \$100 million in a matter of months. Most of all, it raised the awareness of the rare disease. We know now the nature of this debilitating disease. But there is another, more devastating sickness we need to raise the awareness of. It is a sickness called sin. It is fatal. Fortunately, unlike the Lou Gehrig disease, there is a cure for this disease.

So what is sin? Sin is different from crime. Crime is violating a man-made law. Human laws vary from society to society. For example, a polygamist in the U.S. would go to jail if he is convicted. But in some other countries, a man marrying more than one woman would show that he is wealthy and capable. However, sin is different. Sin is violating God's law. It is a transgression against the Almighty God. Anything we do against God is sin. Above all, unbelief is sin. Jesus said so in John 16:9. In the book of Romans, the words "sin" or "sinful" appear many times (I counted 55 "sin" and 20 "sinful"). It is a major theme of the book. We want to learn clearly what sin is, its devastating effects on our lives, and most importantly how this sickness can be cured.

In fact, another major theme of Romans is justification through faith in Jesus Christ. Justification means that God declares a sinner to be righteous, that is, to be right with God. No sinful person is able to do this on his own, no matter how hard he tries. Romans 3:20 says that "no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law." So how can we be justified? The answer is Jesus. "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (5:8). Jesus paid the price of our sin with his blood on the cross. All we have to do is to accept Jesus as our personal Savior, believing God's promise that we are justified through faith in Jesus (5:1). We admit that we are sinners who deserve God's punishment. But Jesus was punished in our place. He loved us so much that he gave his life to redeem us. When we believe in Jesus, God justifies us. This is what Abraham did. "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (4:3). Through our Romans study, we want to learn more deeply about the amazing love of Jesus for us.

III. PURPOSE OF OUR ROMANS STUDY

Throughout history, the lives of many great men and women have been changed by the scriptures of Romans. St. Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430 A.D.) was an influential

Christian theologian and philosopher. But when he was a young man, Augustine was not a good Christian. In fact, he was a womanizer and an intellectual hedonist of his time. He hung around with a group of bad men who boasted of their sexual exploits. We can imagine how his mother Monica, a devout woman, prayed for him in tears many nights. Then something happened to Augustine one day in the summer of 386. He said later in his famous book (*Confessions*) that his conversion to Christian faith came because of a voice. He thought he heard a voice of children saying in Latin “*tolle, lege, tolle lege,*” meaning, “take up and read, take up and read.” Augustine took this as God’s command to open the Bible and read. He obeyed. Guess what scripture he saw when he opened the Bible? It was Romans 13:13-14 which read: “Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.” The life of the young Augustine was changed forever by these words of God from Romans.

When Martin Luther was 21 years old, he was almost killed by lightning. Terrified, he prayed to St. Anne, vowing to become a monk if his life was spared. He did become a monk and a theology professor. But something troubled him. He had no assurance of salvation in his heart. He said, “I was a pious monk... if ever a monk got into heaven by monkery, so should I also have gotten there.” But he had no peace with God. He said: “I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously ... I was angry with God.” During his visit to Rome in 1510, the young Luther climbed the Pilate’s Staircase called *Scala Sancta* (Holy Staircase) on his knees, while doing his penance for his sin. As his knees became bloody, God’s words from Romans came to his mind. Romans 1:17 declares: “For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’” Luther realized that no human effort could save a person from his sins. Only God can save us by his grace, and only through faith in Jesus. It is because Jesus completed the work of salvation on the cross by sacrificing his own life for us. Jesus said, “It is finished.” Finally, joy and peace came to Martin Luther’s heart. He now had the assurance of his salvation that is only by faith in Jesus. He spent his remaining life to reform the church so that other people could turn to this true gospel of Jesus Christ.

I believe that the Holy Spirit can also transform our lives through our Romans study this semester if we humbly accept and obey the word of God. Through our study, we want to learn the essence of the gospel so thoroughly that it becomes a part of our lives. We want to find real inner happiness as we learn to live a life of faith that pleases God. We also want to learn the gospel-centered thinking and missionary vision of St. Paul so that we can joyfully participate in God’s redemptive history. May God grant us a great learning mind as we study the book of Romans! Let us read our key verses: 1:16-17. *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’*