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Introduction To Romans

Romans is Paul's magnum opus, his greatest work, the first systematic theology given to the Church and the clearest and most logical exposition of the gospel according to God's righteousness. It is therefore a tremendous task we are embarking on to give a clear exposition of its vital contents. As far as its importance, the Dutch Annotations say, "This epistle is rightly accounted a key for the right understanding of all the Holy Scriptures."ⁱ William Plumer said, "The epistle...is excelled by no portion of God's word in the weight and excellence of its matter."ⁱⁱ French commentator Frederic Godet called it "the cathedral of the Christian faith."ⁱⁱⁱ W. H. Griffith Thomas said, "It is a theological education in itself."^{iv} Luther in his famous prologue that led to John Wesley's salvation said, "This Epistle is the chief book of the New Testament, the purest gospel. It deserves not only to be known word for word by every Christian, but to be the subject of his meditation day by day, the daily bread of his soul."^v Needless to say, Romans has had and continues to have a unique effect on Christian's thinking and lives. Yet we say it nonetheless to impress upon us the magnitude of its thought-changing and life-changing effects. In it Paul, with logical rigor, sets forth a systematic presentation of the gospel's consistency with God's righteousness. He begins with man's ruin and condemnation in Adam and ends with his glorification in Christ, a work that from beginning to end is of God's grace. As such Romans was almost the entire foundation of the Protestant Reformation. And never was there a man who got tangled up in a cult who had a right understanding of Romans.^{vi}

As to its author we find Paul. Who was Paul? Paul was a Jew of the Diaspora, born with Roman citizenship, born in the city of Tarsus, one of the three top university cities in 1st century Rome. He therefore enjoyed the privileges of Roman citizenship and was well-acquainted with Greek philosophy. He was

the son of a Pharisee and when he was thirteen his father sent him to Jerusalem to be trained by the Pharisee Rabban Gamaliel, the greatest teacher in all of Israeli history. He was a genius and coupled with zeal for the ancestral traditions of Judaism he advanced far beyond many of his contemporaries. He became a member of the most elite group of Jewish society, the Sanhedrin. When he debated Stephen in the Synagogue of the Freedmen he found he was unable to cope with his wisdom. Hence he became vindictive and sought to execute him. Paul realized the implications of Christianity. It was a threat to Judaism because of its explanatory power. When Stephen was out of the picture Paul started persecuting the church in Jerusalem, forcing the Jewish believers to scatter out into the surrounding areas. He was entering house after house and dragging off men and women and putting them in prison. When he learned that the church had spread to Damascus he secured letters from the high priest authorizing him to arrest any disciples he found and bring them to Jerusalem. On the road to Damascus a light brighter than the sun flashed around him and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" On that day he was justified by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and now the Christ he persecuted so zealously he preached with equal zeal. Upon being led blind into Damascus he was met within a few days by Agabus who revealed his commissioning as an apostle. He would testify before Gentiles, kings and the sons of Israel. His mission would be characterized by great difficulty for Christ's sake. When Paul's sight was restored he immediately began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues proving that Jesus "is the Messiah, the Son of God." He then went away into the deserts of Arabia for three years where he was personally trained by the Lord Jesus Christ. When he returned to Damascus he confounded the Jews and they plotted to destroy him. Paul escaped by being lowered in a basket through the wall and went to Jerusalem. When he tried to associate with the disciples they were afraid because of his reputation as a persecutor of the church. Barnabas took him aside and after hearing his story explained to the disciples how Paul had become a believer. In Jerusalem he was a powerful force to be reckoned with and the Jews were plotting to put him to death so the brethren took him to Caesarea by the Sea and sent him away to Tarsus by ship. He then spent about ten years in the area of Tarsus. Initially he probably returned home for the first time since becoming a Christian. Upon returning and hearing the news, his father apparently rejected the Messiahship of Jesus and treated him very harshly, disinheriting him. He went into the region and ministered.

It was during this time that he was caught up to the third heaven. At the end of the ten years Barnabas went looking for him. When he found him he brought him back to Antioch where a tremendous teaching ministry was taking place. Paul joined this teaching group and they trained the disciples at Antioch. From there he, Barnabas and John Mark set off on their first missionary journey. They went to the island of Cyprus and then to southern Galatia preaching the gospels, training the new believers and planting churches. When they returned to Antioch Paul gave the report of Gentile salvation. He was probably encouraged to go to Jerusalem and submit his gospel to Peter, James and John. When his gospel lined up with their gospel it was decided that Peter would be the apostle to the Jews and Paul to the Gentiles. Soon after, Paul wrote Galatians to attack the Judaizing of the gospel. He then attended the Council of Jerusalem where the issue of Gentile salvation and cultural concessions were determined to promote unity between Jew and Gentile. Afterwards he set out from Antioch on his second missionary journey, this time with Silas. They went into southern Galatia to strengthen the churches they had planted. There they found Timothy and took him with them. When they were prohibited from going into Asia Paul had his Macedonian vision and so they went to Europe traveling through Macedonia and eventually into Achaia preaching the gospel, training the believers and planting churches. During this time he wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians to encourage them in their persecution. When he went to Ephesus he met Priscilla and Aquila, a Jewish couple who had recently been expelled from Rome by Emperor Claudius. Paul established them in the faith and left them in Ephesus to form a ministry base while he returned to Antioch. Eventually he returned and received the disturbing report of the Corinthians. In response he wrote 1 Corinthians to correct their carnal abuses. He then made a painful visit to Corinth where he was offended and quickly left going into Macedonia. Here he wrote the severe letter to Corinth and sent it via Titus, himself returning to Ephesus. After sufficient time was allotted for them to repent he went to Troas to meet Titus and get the full report. When he did not find him he anxiously he pressed further into Macedonia and met him along the way. When he found him he was overjoyed to hear that the majority of the Corinthians had repented and disciplined the offender. He wrote 2 Corinthians to encourage them to expand the ministry into the surrounding region and to the saints in Jerusalem by giving a bountiful gift. He also warned those who remained carnal that he was coming soon to correct the situation if necessary. He travelled to Corinth in late

AD55 to spend the winter months. While there he wrote the Romans, probably early in AD57.

How did the Church at Rome become established? On the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 there were Jews from all over the Roman Empire, some of whom Luke said were “from Rome” (Acts 2:10). When Peter preached his kingdom message including the death and resurrection of Jesus they were some of the 3,000 who believed. When they returned to Rome they evidently established house churches all over the Jewish ghetto. As they explained the truth of Jesus’ Messiahship to their fellow unbelieving Jews the church grew. Since Rome was the center of the world news got around rather quickly. As the news of Gentile salvation reached Rome the gospel went out to them too and the Church became a mixed group. In AD50 Seutonius reports that Claudius expelled every Jew from Rome. During this time the Church in Rome became Gentile dominant. Eventually the Jews were permitted to return. By the time of Paul’s writing the church was a mixture of Jew and Gentile but was dominated by Gentiles. The reports of their strong faith were being proclaimed through the whole Empire (Rom 1:8).

Why was Paul writing the Romans? Several reasons. First, Paul had set his sights on Spain and Rome was a stepping stone on the way. Paul had wanted to extend his ministry westward for some time now but due to the troubles at Corinth he was delayed in this endeavor. Now that the Corinthians were straightened out he would soon be on his way (Rom 15:24). Second, Paul wanted to share his spiritual gift with them and to benefit from them sharing their gifts with him (Rom 1:11). This would result in Paul bearing fruit among them. He could easily do this on his way to Spain. Third, Paul was eager to preach the gospel to those in Rome (Rom 1:15). Paul’s principle was that he did not aspire to preach where another apostle had preached (Rom 15:20ff). Since no apostle had preached in Rome Paul aspired to be the first. Fourth, in preparation for his arrival he wanted to proclaim to them his gospel so that they would be solidly established. The systematic presentation of the gospel in Romans is the gospel that all believers need to be well-established in. As Luther said, it should be the daily bread of the soul. Fifth, Paul may have written Romans as a kind of doctrinal treatise for the church. He expresses concern that he may not reach Rome since he must first go to Jerusalem. Paul’s fears were well-founded since he was arrested in Jerusalem and tried in Caesarea before appealing to Caesar and being taken

to Rome a prisoner. Since Paul feared he was near the end of his ministry he may have written Romans as a sort of last will or testament to the gospel. The logical rigor of the exposition could easily be seen as a courtroom defense for the gospel.

What of the order of Romans in Paul's epistles? Paul wrote thirteen epistles and Romans is placed first in the order after the four Gospels and the transitional book of Acts. One suggestion for this order is that the order is based on descending length. F.F. Bruce says, "The sequence was probably based on descending order of length (like the present sequence of the Pauline letters)."^{vii} Romans is the longest of Paul's letters and they do descend in order of length. A second suggestion for the order is that it is based on a divine pedagogy. William Newell says, "We believe that the order of arrangement of Paul's Epistles to the Churches was Divinely established; and that there is a *progress of spiritual experience* from Romans to II Thessalonians."^{viii} Alva McClain agrees saying, "Romans is the first epistle in the reading of the Word of God, I believe it was placed there by the Holy Spirit, because the canon of the New Testament would not be in proper order otherwise...Romans comes first and Thessalonians last, because one is the introduction to Christianity and the gospel, and the other points to the consummation of Christianity when Christ takes the church out of the world."^{ix} Neither of the two views necessarily excludes the other. On the human side Christians may have ordered Paul's epistles according to descending length and on the divine side God may have used this to establish a divine pedagogy. All of history involves both divine sovereignty and human responsibility so it should be no surprise that both God and man have intentions in ordering Paul's epistles. So while it is true that Paul's letters are ordered in descending length, it is also true and more important that they do give a spiritual pedagogy. Romans is the most comprehensive explanation of the gospel, the following epistles explain the mystery nature of the church, the final epistles explain Christ's coming for His church.

What contribution does Romans have among the NT epistles? What are its uniqueness's? First, it is one of only two letters that he wrote to a church in which he had no personal dealings, the other being Colossians. The reason why we have established as the fact that Paul intended to come to them soon and he wanted them to be solid in the foundation of the gospel. Second, it is much less personal and much more formal than Paul's other letters. This

may be because he is writing more of a treatise than a personal letter. In all truth Romans is a treatise within a personal letter. But the treatise takes precedence over the personal aspects. Paul may have chosen to send such a treatise to Rome since it was the center of the world and very influential. If Paul never arrived this treatise could exert its influence on Christians on a much grander scale than if sent to a smaller city. Third, it is the most influential book in the NT. John “Chrysostom had it read to him twice a week.” Martin Luther said when he read Romans 1:17, “The righteous will live by faith,” that it burst upon me, the whole truth that righteousness comes by faith, not by works, and instantly I was set free like a bird out of a cage. Philip Melancthon, another Reformer, “copied it twice with his own hand” in order to make it his own. John Calvin said, “when anyone gains a knowledge of this Epistle, he has an entrance opened to him to all the most hidden treasures of Scripture.” It has been uniquely influential in believer’s lives. Fourth, it is the first systematic theology given to the Church. Alva McClain says, “for the first time, and for the only time in all the epistles of the New Testament, the great doctrines, the system of Christianity, are set forth in logical discourse.”^x Arnold Fruchtenbaum refers to it as, “the first systematic theology.”^{xi}

What is the theme of Romans? Romans 1:16-17, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “**BUT THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.**” “Those two verses sum up the whole book of Romans.”^{xii} They re-state the one verse quoted by Paul, Habakkuk 2:4. In essence it is the good news of righteousness, life and faith. First, the gospel is consistent with God’s righteousness. God’s righteousness is at the whole heart of the discussion because God’s righteousness is the standard for measuring what is right and wrong. Without His standard we can’t gauge our standing with Him. The Scriptures teach that there is none righteous, no not one, that we are condemned as sinners in Adam. The gospel reveals that Christ was righteous and that He died for our sins so that His righteousness can be imputed to us through faith. Second, the gospel gives life. Life is associated with righteousness throughout the book of Romans. In justification we possess new life, in sanctification we enjoy new life and in glorification we have the fullest enjoyment of new life. From beginning to end the gospel gives life. Third, the gospel is by faith. We are justified by faith,

positionally freed from the penalty of sin, we are sanctified by faith, experientially freed from the power of sin and glorified by faith, positionally set free from the presence of sin in the resurrection. So the theme of Romans is found in 1:16-17. Paul's exposition of *The Gospel According to God's Righteousness*. Thus the title of this series will be *The Gospel According to God's Righteousness*. That title best summarizes that the gospel relates to righteousness, life and faith.

Let's walk through each section of Romans. Romans is easy to outline and almost everyone sees the same basic divisions with some minor variation. There are six sections; Condemnation, Justification, Sanctification, Glorification, Explanation and Application. Each section can be further subdivided. Let's give a summary message of each section. The first section is 1:1-3:21, Condemnation. The picture Paul paints is one of universal condemnation. The whole human race is under the wrath of God. It is a very dark picture and probably the most remarkable commentary on why the world is the way it is. In 1:18-32 Paul says that Pagan Gentiles are condemned by creation. They know God through creation but they do not honor Him as God or give thanks but become futile in their speculations and their foolish heart is darkened. Therefore they are presently experiencing God's wrath which manifests itself in the worship of creation and the sexual deviancy which always accompanies creation worship. In 2:1-16 Paul says that not only are Pagan Gentiles condemned but Moral Gentiles are also condemned. They are condemned by conscience. They know that those who practice such things are worthy of death but they not only do the same but give hearty approval to those who practice them. Their inconsistency bears testimony in their conscience and serves as a witness that they deserve death. God is patiently putting up with them in order to give them time to repent. By not repenting they are storing up for themselves wrath in the future day of God's judgment. In 2:17-3:8 Paul says that not only are Pagan Gentiles and Moral Gentiles condemned but Jews also are condemned. They are condemned by the Law of Moses. The Jews had the Law of God revealed to them at Mt Sinai and they taught the Law to others but did not keep it themselves. Furthermore, the Jews were given custodianship over the word of God and yet, even with this advantage, did not uphold the word of God. Paul's conclusion is that both Jews and Gentiles are under sin. There is none righteous, not even one. They all reject God, none seek Him, none do good, they all rush headlong into destruction. By the end of Romans 1:1-3:21 there

is an utter despair; the whole human race stands in darkness, totally condemned and under the just wrath of God. But it is this very despair of darkness that serves as a stark contrast with the light of the gospel of salvation. If men do not see how lost they really are they will not see the glory of salvation.

The second section is 3:21-5:21 and in this section Paul deals with Justification. Justification is the first phase in salvation, it is how a sinful man is credited with the righteousness of God so that He has a perfect legal standing with God. It is being freed from the penalty of sin. It is the past tense of our salvation. In 3:21-31 Paul explains that God could not compromise His justice in declaring men to be righteous. Therefore the penalty of sin had to be paid. Jesus Christ paid the penalty so that God remains both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Since it is through faith that this legal verdict is declared then it is not of works and consequently there is no room left for boasting. In 4:1-12 Paul gives two examples of Jews justified by faith. First, Paul explains that Abraham was justified by faith prior to the giving of the Law. So then justification could not be based on the Law but by faith. Second, he explains that David was justified by faith after the giving of the Law. So then the giving of the Law did not change the means of justification. Justification was never on the basis of works of the Law but always through faith. In 4:13-25 Paul explains that Gentiles too are justified by faith. He argues that this is proved by Abraham because he was justified by faith before he was circumcised. Circumcision was the mark of the Jew so Abraham was justified before he had the mark. Thus Gentiles are justified through faith just as Abraham. Therefore all who have faith are children of Abraham and heirs of the world. The resurrection is stated as the conclusive evidence of our justification. In 5:1-11 Paul shows the results of our justification. We now have peace with God through Christ. When we face trials we have joy because we know that God is at work to transform our lives by the Holy Spirit he has given us. Now that we stand justified we are no longer condemned. There is no wrath for the justified believer. In Rom 5:12-21 Paul summarizes the first two sections and puts it all together in the most important theological crux in the entire NT. He explains how both Jews and Gentiles came to be condemned in Adam and contrasts it with how we come to be justified in Christ. Through the one man Adam sin entered the world and death through sin and so death spread to all men because all sinned. But the free gift of life is not like the sin. For there

was but one sin that brought condemnation to all but many sins resulted in justification of life to the many. So then the sin of the one man Adam made any sinners but the one act of obedience made many righteous.

At this point justified believers might ask, if I am already declared righteous then what point is there in living the Christian life. If I go on living in sin won't that magnify God's grace even more? Paul shudders at this sinful illogic. Sanctification is necessary for the justified believer to enjoy the life he possesses. Therefore in 6:1-8:17 Paul deals with Sanctification. Sanctification is the second phase of salvation, it is how a sinful but justified man grows in experiential righteousness. It is being freed from the power of sin. It is the present tense of salvation. 6:1-23 is the right way to be sanctified. We are to recognize that we have been co-crucified, co-buried and co-resurrected with Christ in order to live a new life. We are no longer enslaved to obey the lusts of the flesh. We are free from the power of sin as we reckon ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ. We must make a conscious effort to not let sin master us, but rather to present ourselves to God as alive from the dead and our members as instruments of righteousness. It will be no benefit to us if we continue in sin. Having been freed from sin as we present ourselves to Him we will be sanctified and enjoy our eternal life. 7:1-25 is the wrong way to be sanctified. Paul explains that the Law is not the way of sanctification. We have died to the Law and now serve in newness of the Spirit. This does not mean that the Law is bad, only that the Law cannot enable us to live the new life. Instead the Law only causes us to stumble more and more. Why is this? Because we still have a sin nature. So while the desire to do good is in me the actual accomplishing of the good is not. There is a war within me, the one who wants to do good but does the very evil I do not want to do. In 8:1 Paul reminds us that we are not condemned because we are in Christ Jesus. He then explains in 8:2-17 that Christ by His Spirit can produce the good. If we set our minds on the things of the Spirit then we will enjoy the life and peace that we have with God. So we are not obligated to the flesh which brings death but to the Spirit who gives life.

In 8:17-25 Paul deals with Glorification. Glorification is the third phase of salvation, it is the reception of a resurrection body. It is being freed from the presence of sin. It is the future tense of salvation. Paul explains that the Holy Spirit is the down payment that assures us of this future bodily resurrection. He also speaks of a restored creation that is set free from the slavery of sin, a

world that will belong to us. This aspect of our salvation we do not see yet, but we hope for it, for who hopes for what he already sees. So we persevere in waiting eagerly for it. Finally Paul deals with Preservation in 8:26-39. Ultimately all things work together for good for those who love God. No matter what might come our way we are super-conquerors through Jesus Christ. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.

In light of the security Paul has just pronounced a Jew might ask, "If God never fails then what about the promises God made to the Jews?" In 9:1-11:36 Paul gives an Explanation of God's program for the Jews. Paul explains that though the Jew had every advantage the promises were not to be enjoyed by all physical descendants of Abraham but only by those who had faith. When the promises failed to precipitate God started calling Gentiles. What if Israel was temporarily being set aside so that God could show mercy to Gentiles? Romans 10:1-21 shows that He called out to Israel through all the prophets but only the remnant had faith. Why didn't the rest respond positively? Because they pursued righteousness by works and not by faith. The fault lay not with God but with Israel. In Romans 11:1-36 Paul explains that Israel has not been permanently set aside because even at that time there was a remnant by God's gracious choice. Yet the majority did reject. But because of it salvation had come to the Gentiles. Using the olive tree Paul explains that Gentiles had been grafted into the rich root of the Abrahamic Covenant to enjoy the blessings during this present age. During this time we should not get arrogant against the Jews because He can graft them back into the tree. When the fullness of the Gentiles has come in then God will turn to Israel again and all Israel will be saved. So then God will have shown mercy to all the sons of disobedience, both Jews and Gentiles. God's promises to the Jews are as certain as they ever were.

In 12-16 Paul finally turns to Application. The application is based on God's mercies which extended to all men ruined in Adam who in Christ enjoy justification, sanctification and glorification and the fact that God has not cast off Israel. In light of His mercies Romans 12 presents the application of Transformation. We should present ourselves to God as living sacrifices and not be conformed to the world but be transformed by the renewing of our mind. Each of us is a member of the body of Christ and has been gifted to make a contribution to the body. We should live the new life of loving one another. In light of His mercies Romans 13 presents the application of

Subjection. God has established human government among men. Therefore if we rebel against these authorities we are rebelling against God. We ought to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and love our neighbor, living every moment as if it is our last moment, behaving properly in the day and making no provision for the flesh and its deeds of darkness. In light of His mercy Romans 14 and part of 15 presents the application of Consideration. Paul explains that we should recognize that not all believers are at the same place in their sanctification. Therefore, those who are more advanced should accept those who are weaker and be considerate of them. We should carefully avoid making a weaker brother stumble. Instead we should pursue things which bring about peace and build up one another. In light of His mercies Romans 15 presents the application of Exemplification. They should follow Paul's example of ministering, always being selfless, providing for those in need and joining with him in prayer. In chapter 16 he reveals that he is sending the letter by way of the sister Phoebe and that the letter was written by Tertius at Paul's dictation with greetings from those at Corinth. In the conclusion he states that God through His all-encompassing gospel of justification, sanctification and glorification is able to establish them as it reaches out to the nations. To God be the glory.

ⁱ William S. Plumer, *Commentary on Romans*, p 30.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, Plumer, p 29.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, Godet, p 1.

^{iv} Rene Lopez, *Romans Unlocked*, p 26.

^v *Ibid.*, Godet, p 1.

^{vi} McClain, p 18.

^{vii} F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, p 130.

^{viii} William R. Newell, *Romans Verse by Verse*, p 573.

^{ix} Alva McClain, *Romans: The Gospel of God's Grace*, p 15-16.

^x *Ibid.*, McClain, p 15.

^{xi} Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Romans*, class notes, Tyndale Theological Seminary.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, McClain, p 18.

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