

THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE ROMANS
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Lesson 1 - Introduction

Introduction to St. Paul and His Theology

This year we will be reflecting on God's word in St. Paul's letter to the Romans. This is the longest of Paul's letters (16 chapters) and the most thorough expression of his theology. We will begin with a brief biography so that we are aware of the historical setting of Paul's ministry. Then, we will look at an overview of Pauline thought so that as we study his letter to the Romans, we will be familiar with the main tenets of his theology.

Paul was born around 10 A.D. in the city of Tarsus (Acts 22:3). At the time of his birth, Tarsus was in an area called Cilicia in Asia Minor. Tarsus is located about twelve miles from the Mediterranean Sea in south central Turkey. As a Jew, Paul was of the tribe of Benjamin (Phil. 3:5), but as one born in a Roman city, he was also a Roman citizen. His citizenship would eventually play a part in his trial in Jerusalem and his journey to Rome. Paul probably had both names "Paul", his Latin name, and "Saul", his Hebrew name, from birth. However, it was on his first missionary journey, after converting Sergius Paulus, the governor of Cyprus, that Paul started to use his Latin name (Acts 13:9), as a sign of his mission to the Gentiles.

Paul evidently came from a fairly wealthy family for they had the means to send him to Jerusalem at an early age (Acts 22:3) to study under the Rabbi Gamaliel. When he returned to Tarsus, he learned the trade of making tent cloth, and he continued to work at this trade during his missionary journeys (Acts 18:3). He did this so that he could "make the gospel free of charge" (1 Corinthians 9:18). As a young Jewish man, Paul was proud to be a Pharisee (Acts 23:6). He truly believed that Yahweh was the only God, and that Yahweh revealed himself through the Torah, the Law of Moses.

Most commentators are of the opinion that Paul was not in Jerusalem during the public ministry of Jesus. They base their view on the fact that in none of his thirteen letters does Paul ever mention seeing Jesus before the Resurrection. If he had seen Jesus, it seems likely that he would have mentioned this. But we do find Paul in Jerusalem soon after the Resurrection for he witnessed and approved of the killing of St. Stephen (Acts 7:58; 26:9f). (The "f" after verse 9 means "verse 9 and following.")

Paul tells us that his fury was so intense against the followers of Jesus that he forced them to blaspheme and he voted in favor of their execution. He even went so far as to pursue them in other cities and this became part of the setting of his conversion.

Around 34 or 35 A.D., one or two years after the Ascension of Jesus, Paul journeyed to Damascus in Syria to arrest Christians. As he approached the city, the Lord appeared to him in his glorified form (Acts 9: 1-19). Paul was knocked to the ground (there is no scriptural reference to his being thrown from a horse) and was unable to see. After a brief dialogue with Jesus, Paul was led into Damascus. There he was baptized and recovered his sight. He spent several years in Arabia reflecting on his experience of seeing the Risen Lord and coming to understand what this experience meant for him. He returned to Damascus, then went to Jerusalem to meet St. Peter (Gal. 1:18) and finally made his way back to Tarsus.

He preached in the communities in Cilicia from 36 to 44 A.D. Around 45 A.D. Barnabas met Paul in Tarsus and brought him to Antioch to introduce him to the Christian community. In 47 A.D. the community in Antioch commissioned Paul and Barnabas for their first missionary journey (Acts 13:1f). During the next two years they traveled to Cyprus and then through what is today central Turkey. When they reached a new town, their usual method was to go to the synagogue and preach first to the Jews. If the Jews would not accept their message, they would preach to the Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch in 48 A.D. and then continued on to Jerusalem. During their stay in Jerusalem, the decision was made by the Church leaders that Paul would be the Apostle to the Gentiles.

In 50 A.D. Paul left for his second missionary journey. He visited several communities which he had established on his first journey. While he was in western Turkey, he had a vision in a dream of a Macedonian beckoning him to cross over to Greece (Acts 16:9). Taking this as a sign, he went there and established communities in Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens and Corinth. It was while he was in Corinth in 51-52 A.D. that he wrote his first letters, the First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians.

His third missionary journey lasted from 53 to 58 A.D. Paul retraced some of the path of his second journey, but he also went to Ephesus and remained there for three years. While in Ephesus he wrote his letter to the Philippians as well as First and Second Corinthians. Paul spent the winter of 57-58 A.D. in Corinth, and while he was there he wrote Galatians and Romans. In 58 A.D. he returned to Jerusalem where he was arrested. Because he was a Roman citizen, he had the right to appeal his case to the emperor which meant he had to be sent to Rome. He arrived in Rome in 61 A.D. and was put under house arrest. Around 62 A.D. he wrote Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon. He was released for several years and there is debate among commentators as to whether he may have traveled once again to Asia Minor. In 66 A.D. he was again under house arrest in Rome and wrote First and Second Timothy and Titus. This completes the list of thirteen letters attributed to Paul. In Col. 4:16 there is strong evidence that Paul also wrote a letter to the Laodiceans, but that letter has been lost. (Most commentators agree that Paul is not the author of the letter to the Hebrews.)

There is little evidence pertaining to the last five years of Paul's life. In Romans 15:24-28 Paul mentions that he plans to go to Spain. Pope Clement I (88-97 A.D.) wrote a letter to the Corinthians during his pontificate, and in his letter he mentioned that Paul journeyed "to the end of the west," a reference to Spain. But if Paul had traveled in Spain, it seems likely that the evidence would be stronger, perhaps a letter from there, or a tradition that Paul was the founder of a particular Christian community. We see nothing like this.

The last chapter of Paul's life reveals that he was martyred in Rome around 67 A.D. during the reign of Nero. It is thought that Paul was beheaded and then buried outside the city of Rome. The Basilica of St. Paul-Outside-The-Walls was constructed by Constantine over what was believed to be the tomb of Paul.

With our imagination we can create a mental image of Paul. The name "Paulus" means small so he may have been born prematurely or at least was small at birth. This does not necessarily mean that he was short of stature as an adult, but it is possible. There is also an indication that Paul may have had poor eyesight, perhaps due to cataracts or glaucoma. In Gal. 4:15 he reminds the Galatians that when he came to them they did not reject him, but accepted him as an angel from God and would have given him their own eyes. At the end of Galatians, Paul adds a message in his own large script (6:11).

In his personality, Paul was a man of intense convictions. This is evident in his fierce defense of Judaism, and then after his conversion, his total dedication to Christ in the proclamation of the gospel. He also did not hesitate to confront St. Peter in Antioch (Gal. 2:11f) when Peter was reluctant to eat with Gentile Christians. Paul could also be demanding in what he expected of his fellow workers. For example, on his first missionary journey, he took John (Mark) along as an assistant (Acts 13:5). But apparently this young man left Paul when difficulties arose, and so Paul refused to allow him along on the second journey. This disagreement became so heated that Barnabas separated from Paul and took John Mark to Cyprus, while Paul took Silas with him. (This John Mark is thought to have been the author of the Gospel According to Mark.)

There are many other aspects of Paul's personality which we could discuss. The inner strength he possessed is reflected most fully in his ability to endure persecution without becoming cynical and bitter. Even when he was stoned by the people in Lystra (Acts 14:8f) he got up and went back into the same town. Paul would let nothing hinder his mission to preach the Gospel. He knew that his calling was to build up the kingdom of God in this world.

Paul's Theology

This brief overview of Paul's theology will only be able to touch on a few of the major themes. But even this limited exposure will assist us in appreciating the tremendous impact that Paul has had on our Christian tradition.

If we wanted to try to describe the origin of all of Paul's theology, we would have to go back to his formation in the Jewish tradition. As we have already seen, Paul studied the Torah and the Hebrew scriptures under one of the great rabbis, Rabbi Gamaliel. As a Pharisee he already believed in the resurrection of the dead (Acts 23:8). And monotheism was the foundational belief upon which all his other beliefs were based. The Jewish people expressed their belief in a personal God in the prayer called the Shema, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone" (Deuteronomy 6:4; Mark 12:29). Our intention here is to concentrate on Paul's Christian theology, recognizing that Christianity has its roots in Judaism.

The primary belief which identifies Christianity is: "Jesus is Lord!" (1 Corinthians 12:3). Paul came to his belief in the unique experience of his conversion when he saw Jesus on the road to Damascus. (If you have not done so recently, please read Acts 9:1-19.) This vision of the Risen Lord became the core experience for Paul. What we will do is examine this experience and then highlight five major themes which flow from it.

As Paul was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians, a light from the sky suddenly enveloped him and he fell to the ground. Then a very brief dialogue took place. A voice said to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Paul answered, "Who are you, Lord?" and the voice said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." In this encounter Paul came to understand two truths which guided the rest of his life. First, he came to believe that this Jesus is Lord, the promised Messiah. Paul had never doubted that Jesus had actually lived. But he only thought of him as a blasphemer who called himself the Son of God and who had disrupted Jewish tradition. We could perhaps understand Paul more easily if we recognized that for a Jewish person the idea of God becoming incarnate, taking on our human nature, was impossible. And the idea of God being Trinitarian, Three in One, never entered their minds. It would never have entered our minds either unless it had been revealed by God.

Paul also knew that Jesus had died. He had been crucified by Roman soldiers, and when the Romans executed someone that person was dead, not in a coma. Now this same Jesus was alive, talking to Paul and manifesting the glory that was only attributed to God. Jesus had indeed been raised. This fact of the death-resurrection of Jesus would become the cornerstone for all of Paul's preaching.

The dialogue revealed a second truth to Paul. Notice that this event took place approximately two years after the Ascension of Jesus, and yet Jesus said to Paul, "Why do you persecute me?" Paul came to realize that Jesus is so intimately identified with his people that whatever is done to another Christian is done to Jesus. What agony Paul must have endured when he realized the suffering he had caused to the body of Christ, the Church. But just as St. Peter's greatness lies in his willingness to believe that Jesus forgave him totally after he denied Jesus three times, so too, Paul's greatness lies in his willingness to allow the mercy of Christ to heal and comfort him. Paul was able to forgive himself because he believed that this was what Christ wanted.

Now let's look at five themes:

First, **Substitution**. Remember that Paul was Jewish. He could not and did not desire to disassociate himself from the covenantal relationship which God formed with his Chosen People. Paul was worshipping the true God. Now he realized that God had indeed formed a new and eternal covenant with all humanity in the person of his Son, Jesus. The old covenant was revealed through the Torah, which is also called the "Law of Moses" or simply the "Law". Paul and all the Jewish people believed that the Torah was eternal, that it existed before creation, that it was the perfect revelation of God and God's will. If a person lived the Torah, that person would one day be with God in heaven. Although it is an oversimplification, we sometimes hear Paul's theology described as Substitution, for what Paul did was substitute Jesus for the Torah. Jesus as the second person of the Trinity is eternal. In his divine nature he existed before all creation. And now in his own person, Jesus is the perfect revelation of God.

The opening words of St. John's Gospel are, "In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The Jewish people also had a prayer which stated, "in the beginning was the Torah, the Torah was with God." We will find numerous references to the Torah, or the "Law" in Paul's letter to the Romans. The deep frustration that Paul and many Jewish people felt was that the law could not be kept. No one could fulfill every precept of the Law. What happened was that the Law, which was supposed to be a means of drawing a person closer to God, actually became a cause of separation from God. The Law could point out what a person should do; it did not help a person to actually accomplish what was demanded. Paul will say that in Jesus we are not only shown how to draw closer to God, but also how Jesus makes this happen. Jesus exceeds the Torah.

Second, **Justification**. This is one of the most important themes in Paul's theology. If we want to understand him, we must understand what he means by Justification or Righteousness.

There are many references in the Scriptures to the "Justice of God." At times this is a reference to the wrath of God, i.e. how God will fight for Israel against its enemies. In our everyday language, we use the term "justice" to mean "being fair" or "giving people what is rightfully theirs." But when we are reading or praying Paul's works we must erase both ideas from our minds. Most of the time Paul is not talking about the wrath of God nor about giving people what they deserve. When Paul speaks of God's justice, he means that we are made "just"; we are put in right relationship with God. The death-resurrection of Jesus has justified us by taking away our sins and making it possible for us to be at peace with God. This is what he means by justification: to be made holy.

In Paul's way of thinking, we are very fortunate that God does not give us what we deserve for we are all subject to sin. We do not deserve God. But by our baptism we are incorporated into Christ, we become one with him, and in doing so the Father looks upon us with the same affection and love with which he looks upon his Son.

The phrase “in Christ” will appear many times in Paul’s writings. For Paul this is not just an affiliation with Christ, it is a participation in his very being, a participation in his divine life to the extent that we can call the Almighty God our Abba, our Father.

Third, **Indwelling**. As we examine these themes, we should keep in mind that these are not independent realities. They are ways of looking at the one reality of life in God through Jesus and in the Holy Spirit. Paul was very much aware of the power of the Holy Spirit and in the indwelling presence of the Spirit. It is the Spirit who guides him on his missionary journeys (Acts 16:6f).

One of the images Paul will use to convey his belief in the indwelling presence of the Spirit is that of the Temple. For the Jewish people, the Temple in Jerusalem was sacred, because that was the special place of God’s dwelling among his people. God was not confined to the Temple, but he was present there. In a similar way because of our baptism, we become the dwelling place of God (Eph. 3:17). God lives within us in the power of his spirit thereby making us sacred, making us the Temple of God. (1 Corinthians 3:17).

Because of this indwelling, we have also become a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). Paul will intentionally use this term “creation” because it draws on God’s power to give life, as in the Genesis account. When God looked at his creation, he declared it to be very good, and we are a new creation in Christ Jesus.

Fourth, **The Body of Christ**. This theme is deeply rooted in the mind of Paul because of the experience of his conversion. Recall how Jesus identified himself with his people. Because Jesus shares life with each individual, these same individuals share life with one another. Jesus is our bond of unity. This unity is manifested sometimes in suffering, in sharing of gifts, and in the sharing of the Eucharist.

There is a famous line in Col. 1:24 in which Paul says, “I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church.” Paul is obviously not saying that Jesus did not do enough. The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is infinite and eternal in its effects. But what Paul is saying is that Christ in his body, meaning his Church, is still suffering, and it almost seems that there is a certain amount of suffering that the Church must endure until the end of time. Paul finds joy in his suffering, not in a masochistic way, but in knowing that he is helping to build up the body of Christ. As Jesus’ suffering brought redemption and life, so too, our suffering if it is done in Christ can be redemptive.

Paul also uses the analogy of the body because he recognizes that the Spirit gives different gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4f). Just as all the parts of the body must work together for the good of the whole person, so must the members of the Church work together for the good of the body of Christ. It is in this context of the body of Christ that we say that there is no such thing as a private sin. Anything that wounds even one individual is a wound to the whole body. Either this is true or there is not unity with and in Christ.

It is in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 that Paul reminds us that we are the body of Christ because we share the Eucharist. The Eucharist both symbolizes our unity and causes our unity. We are all receiving the same Lord; therefore, we are all sharing the same divine life. Paul's prayer is that one day the unity we share in the Eucharist will come to its completion in heaven.

Fifth, **Charity**. Who could ever think of Paul and not think of 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, his beautiful description of Christian love? For Paul, the primacy of Jesus as Lord, our justification by the death-resurrection of Jesus, the indwelling presence of the Spirit, and our unity with one another as the body of Christ, all lead to the summary call of Jesus to "Love one another" (John 15:12). That is what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Our sufferings, our faith, our work, our study, our everything, all mean nothing if we do not have love for one another. Our charity toward others lets us know the degree to which we have allowed the Spirit of Jesus to enter our lives.

We will see these themes and many others in our study of Paul's letter to the Romans. Let us remember that this is not just the ancient work of a man who lived two thousand years ago; this is the living Word of God. God has given us minds which he wants us to use to better grasp his message in the scriptures. Our prayer is that our time spent with the Word of God will make us clearer images of Jesus his Son.

Are you ready to study Romans? Good!

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