

## The Just Shall Live by Faith -- Thoughts on the Letter to the Romans

Joy Schmidt [Pople]  
January 1974



*Reformer Martin Luther spoke highly of the Letter to the Romans*

One of the greatest monuments to the Christian faith is the Apostle Paul's Letter to the Romans. It highlights the nature and effects of sin, the work of Christ, the transformed life of the Christian, and God's providence for Israel and the Gentiles. The Apostle Paul is credited with interpreting the life and teachings of Jesus to the Greek and Roman world of his time and shaping the entire course of Christianity.

The Christian church throughout the centuries has based much of its theology on the writings of the Apostle Paul, rather than those of John or Peter or the Gospel writers. The Letter to the Romans was Paul's most systematic attempt to outline basic Christian theology.

Of all Paul's letters, this is the most formal, dogmatic, and universal. In it, Paul presents a complete statement of the fundamental principles of the Gospel which make it the true religion, meeting the desires of human nature that Judaism could not satisfy: righteousness in the sight of God and deliverance from the power of

sin and death.

Many profound works have been written on the theology of the Apostle Paul and on the letter to the Romans. Nineteen early church fathers quoted it as authoritative scripture. Martin Luther, for example, is noted for his writings on Paul. Rather than attempting a thorough exegesis of this letter, I will recount Paul's views on several aspects of religious thought.

Characteristic of Paul's writings is the opening summary of the Gospel, here in 1: 1 -6. Paul writes that God promised the "good news" (gospel) through the prophets; this gospel was the coming of His son. The son of God was from the line of David (in the flesh) and Son of God (according to the Spirit). His resurrection was the seal of his divine son ship. It was through Christ that Paul received his mission to bring all nations to obedience and faith in Christ.

### The principle of creation

Paul makes some basic statements about God and man, and their relationship. He writes that the invisible nature of God, especially His eternal power and deity, is clearly perceivable in creation (1:19-20). He says that man's conscience also bears witness to God's law (2: 15). Although the Apostle Paul often speaks of God's judgment on the wicked (Ch. 2, for instance), he gives the great promise of God's good purpose for man: "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose" (8:28); and in chapter 11 he speaks of God's mercy upon all (v. 32). God's mind, however, is still beyond the comprehension of man (11:34).

On the give and take between God and man Paul becomes quite eloquent, both about God's condemnation of fallen man and about the restoration of man to God through Christ. In chapter 8 we find some of the best biblical expressions of the ideal of this relationship:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God (v. 14-16).

What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies (v. 31 - 33).

Paul continues by saying that Jesus intercedes for us at the right hand of God, that in all trials we are conquerors through him, and that absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. This relationship with God affects our relationship with our fellow man. The church should be like one body, even though each person is a different member and has a different function: "So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (12:5). Civic responsibility is not omitted either.

We should "Pay to all them (secular rulers) their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom

revenue is due, honor to whom honor is due" (13:7). Paul sums up the Ten Commandments-as did Jesus-with the rule of love, to love your neighbor as yourself (13: 9). Regarding the purpose of man's existence, Paul often seems to stress that man has not fulfilled his true purpose and that "Not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved" (8:23-24). Although Paul never mentions a second coming of Jesus here, we assume that this complete "redemption" awaits this glorious event. Some other comments are applicable here. Our life should be centered not on ourselves, but on Christ: "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (14:8). Paul also speaks of the quality of life that should characterize the Christian: "For the kingdom of God does not mean food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit; he who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual up building" (14: 17-19). According to Paul, then, the purpose of life is not self-centered, but Christ centered and directed towards creating a people or a family of God.

The relationship between mind and body is also discussed here by Paul:

I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect (12: 1-2).

The most important part of man is his mind, or spirit, according to Paul. It is the mind that must be transformed and renewed by a relationship with God, and then man's body presented to God as a living sacrifice.

### **The fall of man**

Most of Paul's beautiful descriptions of God's ideal for man come in the latter part of this letter. At the beginning are the vivid descriptions of the fallen state of man and God's sorrow over man. Although Paul does not clearly state the origin of sin, he talks about Adam's disobedience (5: 19) and the overwhelming evidence of sexual perversion of fallen man (1: 24, 26, 27). It is evident, at least, that man turned away from the clearly seen pattern of God, and fell into ignorance, pride, jealousy, desire to dominate, lies, misuse of love, etc. (1: 18-32). "No one is righteous," Paul claims (3: 10-18, 23).

Even Christians are not free from the power of Satan; Paul urges his readers not to let sin control their bodies (6: 12-13) and in chapter 7 dramatically tells of the conflict between the forces of good and of evil within himself and within Christians in general:

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (7:21-24).

He concludes that even though he has found spiritual victory and freedom through Jesus, still in his flesh the law of sin works. In chapter 8 he urges his readers to subjugate their bodies, to reject the law of the flesh, and to wait for the future redemption of their bodies (v. 23).

Before the fall, man must have been free to follow God. But since the fall, there has been no true freedom. "I do not understand my own actions," Paul writes, "for I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (7: 15). Through the work of Christ, however, man is spiritually freed from Satan, as Paul writes, "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death" (8:2).

### **The mission of Jesus**

Our discussion already has stressed the great importance of Jesus. He was foretold by the prophets, he was designated the son of God (in chapter 1). In chapter 3, sinful man is "justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith" (3:24, 25), Christ is the great Reconciler, in Paul's thinking. He brings peace between God and man in 5: 1; he gives man eternal life, righteousness, and grace in 5: 18-21. How does he do this? The legal interpretation of the atonement (how Christ's death could pay for man's sin) is expressed by Paul in 8:3-4:

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Sinful man was condemned to death, but Jesus came as a man in the flesh and by his righteous death, he

paid the penalty of sin for man. Other theories to explain the atonement have been proposed by later theologians, but this still remains popular in Christian circles. A formula commonly used to show people how to accept Christ is given in 10:9: "Because, if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Paul wisely stresses both the inner condition of heart (believing) and the outer action (confessing, expressing) as necessary to experience salvation.

Jesus had used the metaphor of branches and vine to picture the relationship of the believers to him in John 15:5. In Romans Paul elaborates on this. The Israelites had been prepared as branches by God to receive the Messiah and be grafted onto him; but they rejected Jesus when he came. Therefore, the Gentiles were grafted into their place. He writes to his non-Jewish readers:

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot were grafted in their place to share the richness of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches.... They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast only through faith (11:17, 18, 20).

If the people had believed in Jesus when he came to earth and united with him, they would have been grafted onto him as sons and daughters of a new ancestor of mankind, a new Adam (5: 14, 18). Paul clarifies the ideal of this relationship with God through Christ as that of father and son:

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him (8:15-17).

In other words, we are to be children of God and share the same heritage as Christ, if we share his sufferings. But this is still only partially fulfilled, for later on, Paul says that Christians still wait for future "adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (8:23).

Clearly, the doctrine of atonement, or how Christ's death and resurrection could pay the price of mankind's sins, needs a fuller explanation than Paul's legal one, if it is to result in a vine/branch or father/son relationship. Jesus' vicarious death could pay for man's spiritual salvation, but Paul implies more is to be expected. Satan still has dominion in the realm of the flesh, even of Christians. Why we need adoption into the lineage of God is never clarified by Paul. And why we must wait for this adoption, and why so many of the promises remain to be fulfilled at another time, is never satisfactorily explained in Paul's writings.

### **Spiritual growth**

In Romans, Paul also shows the difference between life and death, from God's point of view. "To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace" (8:6). A Christian is transformed from death unto life, according to Paul, by first sharing Christ's death and then the resurrection. So we should consider ourselves "dead (cutting off give and take) to sin and alive unto God through Christ" (6:5-11).

Paul argues that the uniqueness of the spiritual growth attained through Christ lies in the difference between "law" and "grace." Under the law, mankind was condemned to death because of sin. But God by His grace has given believers life through Christ. In the letter to the Ephesians Paul clarifies that salvation is by the grace of God alone (2:8). Thus the difference between the Old Testament age and the New Testament age is that of law and grace, or servanthood and sonship.

The branch of Christianity that believes in God's absolute predestination of each individual's destiny gets most of its scriptural base from the Letter to the Romans. Here, in a context stressing God's purpose in choosing the Israelites as a central people prepared to receive the Messiah, Paul explains why God chose Jacob over Esau, saying that "the elder shall serve the younger" (9: 13). But Paul does not explain why God preferred the younger children to the eldest. Paul also says that the clay (man) has no right to tell the potter (God) to shape him in a certain way (9:20-24). It is this that sinful man has no right to complain to God about his treatment, since he really does not even deserve to live because of all the suffering he has caused God throughout the ages. Another passage reads:

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified (8:29-30).

One factor is omitted here, which Paul makes clear in other portions of this letter. God called people, and when they fulfilled their mission, He glorified them. But when people failed all or sometimes part of their responsibility, God had to call someone else to take their place.

## Principle of restoration in history

Paul writes from an overall perspective of God's working through history, although not so detailed as the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews or Old Testament writers, such as the Psalmists. Perhaps because the early Christians were quite severely persecuted by the Jews, they did not stress God's long preparation of a chosen people.

Old Testament writers, however, maintained a very clear vision of how God had led the Israelites in the past and exactly what role the current generation was expected to play in the whole picture. They could clearly see the connection between their faithfulness to God's law and their prosperity as a nation, or between their rejection of God, and the suffering they had to endure until God could again deliver them. But Christians have seldom grasped this connection in a collective sense.

Paul gives a universal picture from the beginning of God's workings with man. Adam disobeyed God, sinned, and brought death to all men. The effects were universal. Paul writes, "Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come" (6: 14), and "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..." (3:23). All must repent and come back to God. But what is the path back to God? Paul points the way:

For he (God) will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury (2:6-8).

This principle applies to everyone, Jew and Gentile alike. "They show that what the law requires is written in their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them" (2: 15). So in every age, man's conscience has served as a guide for right living even if man has not been taught the revealed law of God.

God has set up certain conditions which, when man faithfully fulfills them, can bring him back to God and partially pay the price of release from Satan's bondage. One such sign was circumcision, given to Abraham and the Jews. To the Jews, who prided themselves on this outward sign of being God's chosen people, Paul said that true circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal (2:29) and that righteous living was the true mark of God's children. Similarly, baptism, described in chapter 6, was meant for the Christians as a sign of death or separation from sin and Satan, and rebirth through uniting with the resurrected Jesus in new life in God. Obedience is another condition for returning to God, for Paul speaks of the difference between slavery to sin and obedience in heart to God, which leads to righteousness.

Paul turns to Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, whom God called as the seed of His chosen people. But Paul says that it was Abraham's faith that justified him, not his actions, and that he became a father to all men of faith, not just of the Jews. Abraham stood on the foundation of Abel and Noah, great men of faith whom God called to special missions. God prepared a special lineage of men and women of faith as ancestors for the Messiah.

However, when Abraham's descendants would lose their faith, God had to chastise them, or even turn to another people (the Christians). Paul gives only a very sketchy view of God's preparation for Jesus and the real principles at work. He speaks in general about the need for obedience to God in order to be cleansed from sin, and the condition of faith. Yet he does not fully explain just how fallen nature is removed from man's character and what role Christ plays in its removal.

Most noticeably absent from this monumental letter is a discussion of the last days and the return of Christ. Paul treats this elsewhere: I Cor. 15; I Thess. 4; II Thess. 1-2; II Tim. 3.

Modern Protestantism is a testimony to the impact of the Letter to the Romans. Martin Luther received the great inspiration for his life work by reading in Romans: "The just shall live by faith" or, in the Revised Standard Version, "He who through faith is righteous shall live" (1:17). From this point he began the pursuit of salvation by faith in Christ. He wrote concerning the Letter to the Romans:

The true masterpiece of the New Testament, and the very purest Gospel, which is well worthy and deserving that a Christian man should not only learn it by heart, word for word, but also that he should deal with it as with the daily bread of men's souls. For it never can be too read or studied, and the more it is handled, the more precious it becomes, and the better it tastes.