

Intro to Romans

Some weeks ago I said a few words about the origin, if that is the correct term, of Paul's letter to the Romans. Over the next weeks I shall occasionally say more words about the content of the letter, about the message it gives and the lessons we should learn from it – and there's lots!

Firstly, let me recap on the context of this important letter. Paul's ministry had taken him on a number of trips around the Near and Middle East, as we know it today. In many places he stayed for a while as he planted churches and spread the Good News. Afterwards, there were concerns or difficulties in some of these churches. Remember, Paul knew most of the characters involved and so he had a close relationship with them. This close friendship allowed him to clearly address the problems and give clear advice.

Rome was a different matter. Paul had great ambition to visit because he had received good reports from there. It is likely the first Christians in Rome were among the 3000 early converts at the first Pentecost. Paul neither knew them nor the situation of their church. He was convinced, however, that the Romans needed a 'pep' talk and so a visit was essential. He had an ambition to go to Spain and so to 'drop off' in Rome seemed the thing to do!

It is quite likely that the Romans knew about Paul and his exploits but just in case he decided to write to them a letter of introduction. The final draft proved to be something quite more than a 'Hello' note! It is 3 to 4 times as long as his other letters.

In much the same way you would look to an operating instruction with a new gadget, so Paul presented a 'Christian DIY manual'. His letter is a detailed instruction manual, user handbook and members handbook all in one. Paul was convinced he needed to lay out his stall and therefore leave the Romans in no doubt whatsoever what was required of them to prosper in God's kingdom. That said, there were a number of notable omissions, which I shall highlight at some stage.

That is the short introduction! What is in the letter proper? Firstly, Paul was old and probable unable to write properly so he had a scribe write everything down for him.

He introduces himself and lays down his credentials (Chap 1). He apologises he has not visited earlier, but he says the Romans have always been in his thoughts and prayers. It seems that just as he sets out for Rome something more important crops up , which needs his attention.

The bulk of the first chapter is taken up extolling God's goodness, His mercy and His blessings.

Paul emphasises that ignoring God will mean disaster and pain. You ignore God's lead at your peril – but you have a choice.

In the second chapter we are told that no matter what we think or do or say will get past God. He knows everything and any attempt to deny or pass the blame will add to the evidence against you on the day of judgement. Effectively, Paul says, each transgression will be added fuel to the fire, which will eventually be presented. God is looking for and delights in the follower who hears the laws and abides by them, not the one who ignores Him. Rest assured that whatever you think, do or say, God will be your judge in the final analysis. It does not matter what your background might be or where you live or how rich or poor you might be. God treats everyone the same. Remember, Paul was aware of the divide between Jews and non-Jews, but made it clear that the death and resurrection of Jesus made access to God open to all. He mentions circumcision and what that entails. He also says it matters not whether you are circumcised or not – thank goodness!

In chapter 3, Paul emphasises there is no difference between Jew and Gentile when dealings with God are involved. Indeed, it is the complication of Jews bending the rules, because they feel superior, that causes most upset. Non- Jews coming to the Lord, through Jesus, do so with no

attached baggage, no pre-conceived ideas about what God is. After all, there is only one God so any belief in a 'God' other than Our God is meaningless.

What God put right for Moses, Jesus has put right for us. Through our belief in Him and His sacrifice for us we are saved, provided we prove worthy of God's love - although He loves us regardless of our sins and misdemeanours. It is not good enough to sin and expect automatic forgiveness, knowing that afterwards we will sin again, in the same way. The forgiveness we seek and the forgiveness we deserve require us to truly repent and do better next time!

I once knew a young lady who regarded herself as a Christian. She was made to go to church regularly and make her confession. I quizzed her about this and she simply said, words to the effect, 'when I have sinned, I come clean in Confession and ask for forgiveness. I do my penance, and then the slate is clean for me to repeat my sins. I can then go to Confession, again!'

Moving on to Chapter 4, we read that the close relationship between Abraham and God was successful because God chose him to lead His people. When all the signs were against Abraham doing anything positive with his life and the situation generally being pretty bad for him, he depended entirely on God. God, in turn, saw that Abraham was just the man to lead Israel forward in the way God desired. He blessed Abraham for his faithfulness and obedience, even making him a father in his dotage!

We are required to have that same obedience and to exhibit to all, family, friends and others, our faithfulness, trust and reliance on God. His faithfulness to us is the same whether we are Christians or hearing of Him for the first time. God wants a close relationship with everyone, regardless of gender, faith, colour or creed. It is our job to make sure we tell those who do not already know Him all about Him! God's promises are free to everyone, whether or not we follow the laws of Moses, provided we have a faith in Him, like Abraham!

I shall call a halt there. I have galloped through the first 4 chapters and I hope you have followed the general gist of what I have been saying. Reading a workshop manual is often confusing and complicated and Romans is no exception. I suggest that you read those chapters in your own time, preferably from more than one version of the Bible. I have tried to make things simple and understandable.