

PAUL'S LETTER TO THE ROMANS

There is no chronological order to the New Testament epistles, and the order in the Russian Bible, for example, is different to the English Bible. However it is usually possible by internal clues in the letters to work out approximately when they were written. For example, the Roman letter must have been composed at the end of Paul's third journey, because he explains at some length in the closing chapters that he has now completed his work of preaching in what we now call Turkey, and was ready to move on. First he needed to go to Jerusalem with a collection of money for the believers there (this collection is referred to in 1 Corinthians 16:1, 2). Then he proposed to drop in on the Roman brothers and sisters on his way to Spain - *"I hope to see you in passing", he said, "as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while"* (Romans 15:24). So the letter was to prepare the Roman Christians for his visit.

Although he had not been to Italy before, Paul had met many of the believers in Rome in his travels, for he sends greetings to more than twenty of them in his last chapter. People evidently moved quite freely around the Mediterranean area. It is likely that a good proportion of the congregation were Jews. There would be many synagogues in the capital city, and some of their members would have come across the gospel on trips to Jerusalem. At any rate, it is to the **Jewish Christians** that the Apostle directs this brilliant essay. His aim is to persuade them that although Israel has an important role in the purpose of God, descent from Abraham and a knowledge of the Law of Moses will not of itself bring salvation from sin and death. What matters is faith in God, and belief in the sacrifice of Jesus. Without this no one will be saved.

He begins with a graphic description of Roman society. In a world which does not

acknowledge a Creator, he says, anything goes (we can see the same phenomenon today). It was a brutal, selfish society. But it was unreasonable for the Jew, with his divinely revealed Law, to condemn the Gentiles for their immorality, unless he lived a blameless life himself. And that was the problem. The Law of Moses was very good at spotlighting human sin, but it did not take that sin away. It left Jews, as well as Gentiles, trapped in a situation where they are condemned to death because they both fail to attain the holy life that God desires. In fact the Jew, who knew the Scriptures well, was more, not less, guilty than the Roman citizen, who had only a general appreciation of right and wrong.

Take circumcision, he says. It was a sign of the covenant between God and his people. But God called Father Abraham **righteous** (this word literally means counted innocent before a judge) *long before he was circumcised*. So you do not have to be circumcised to be saved. And he was called righteous, not for any great deed he performed, but because he believed God meant what he said. Faith was the key. We are all sinners, Paul argues, both Jews and Gentiles, and the only way to escape is to believe in Jesus.

We express our faith in him, he writes in Romans chapter six, by being **baptised** – an immersion under water is a symbol of death and resurrection. In the water all our sins are left behind. We start a new life. We change sides, crossing over from Adam to Christ. From now on, we belong to God, and Sin no longer holds us as his slaves. Of course, we still continue to sin. We battle against what our human nature impels us to do, and we fail. But God in Christ will forgive our lapses when our hearts are right. Chapter eight is the climax of his argument. We are so privileged, he says, to have been adopted by God as his sons and daughters. We are

heirs, waiting for the day when we shall receive the rights to the father's fortune. Of course the waiting for God's Kingdom is tedious, and we groan as we suffer. But the best is still to come. And whatever happens in life, we can be sure that the love of God and his Son will surround us to the grave.

The next section deals with the position of Israel in the purpose of God. They had the privilege of knowing God, and his commandments. But they had tried to turn righteousness into obeying a long list of 'do's' and 'don'ts'. This does not work. We cannot earn salvation. We have to believe in the one God sent. Sadly, this left the majority of the Jews deaf to the call of the gospel. Only a minority, like the 7000 who believed in Elijah's day, had been baptised. However, God being merciful, Paul concludes, there will come a future day when Jesus the Redeemer will come back to his people, and forgive their past. Then Israel the nation will be restored to God, like a broken off branch grafted back into its tree. *"In this way all Israel will be saved"* (Romans 11:26) – all Israel, that is those of Abraham's race who at last have come to have faith in the Saviour they crucified, and those Gentiles who already had the faith of Abraham and are counted as his children.

The book of Romans ends in short exhortations, with instructions about prayers, about tolerance towards those who take a different view on unimportant issues, and the importance of unity. The Apostle's plans to visit them, as we can see with hindsight from the book of Acts, were not to be fulfilled. He was arrested at Jerusalem, and spent years in prison. But he got to Rome in the end, in the custody of a centurion, and after two more years in jail he was released to continue his work for the Lord he loved so well.

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