

October 11, 2009

Romans 1.1-17: Saved by Faith

Purpose: To affirm that through faith we participate in God's salvation

Key Bible reference: Romans 1.1-17

Key Verse: Romans 1.16

Biblical Interpretation

Reading the entire Book of Romans will help you understand how the themes in any one given part of the book relate to the primary issues and ideas presented in the letter as a whole.

Paul probably wrote this letter to the churches at Rome during the three months he spent in Corinth (see Acts 20:1-3) in the winter of A.D. 56-57, just before he left on his journey to Jerusalem to deliver the offering that had been collected for Christians there (Romans 15:28). In the last chapter he commends Phoebe (Romans 16:1), who was from the town of Cenchreae [SEN-kruh-ee] near Corinth, to the Romans' hospitality when she arrives in their city. He also sends greetings from his host, Gaius of Corinth (Romans 16:23).

The immediate reason for the letter is to ask the Roman house churches to aid Paul's mission to Spain (Romans 15:24, 28). Because believers in all places are one in salvation through Christ, Paul urges them to unite in supporting the proclamation of the good news, which is "the power of God for salvation to everyone" (Romans 1:16). Paul's exposition of the theme of justification by faith is the theological foundation for this evangelistic mission. Thus he wants the Romans to understand and to support his position.

Unlike Paul's other letters, Romans is sent to a church he did not found. Therefore he devotes

verses 1-15 of Chapter 1 to introducing himself and presenting his credentials. Then Paul uses verses 16-17 to summarize the gospel he is called to preach, which he expounds in the rest of the letter.

Romans 1:1-2. Paul begins his self-introduction by saying he is called to be a servant, an apostle, and one set apart. His calling came directly from Christ at the time of his conversion (Acts 22:1-16; 26:12-18). The word translated servant literally means slave. In imperial Rome a slave was not necessarily in a "servile" position; one could be a slave in the sense of being a representative, as in being a slave or representative of Caesar. Thus Paul represents Christ as an apostle, that is, as "one sent with a message on a mission." Paul's mission is to proclaim the gospel, the good news of God, the focus of the epistle. The word God appears over 150 times in Romans, that is, about once every 46 words. Romans is basically a book about God.

Verses 3-4. After the word Son, these verses are taken from an early Christian creed. We can infer from the mention of David that this creed was developed by Jewish Christians, although the references to "the spirit of holiness" and "resurrection from the dead" would appeal to Gentiles. Paul's point: Jesus the Messiah has both the historical and the spiritual qualities to be the universal Savior.

Verses 5-6. Paul here stresses "our" and "we," suggesting that the authority from Christ to proclaim the good news to the Gentiles is shared with all who accept his call "to belong to Jesus Christ." All Christians are missionaries and/or evangelists!

Verse 7. The letter is addressed to "all God's beloved in Rome." Roman Christians were probably dispersed over several house churches. Paul tells these believers that God cares for them all and wants them to love one another and to live faithful, dedicated lives. He offers his standard greeting, stressing the grace and peace of the priestly blessing in Numbers 6:25-26. Both benedictions have been widely used throughout church history.

Verses 8-10. Having established his apostolic credentials and given his greeting, Paul now praises the Roman Christians for their faith, assures them of his prayerful concern, and states his intention to pay them a visit. The "all of you" in verse 8 may be intended to include both those still committed to observance of traditional Jewish patterns of worship and conduct and those who felt no obligation to conform to Jewish calendar and law. In Chapters 14 and 15, these persons are referred to as the "weak" and the "strong," respectively.

Serving God "with my spirit" (verse 9) is another way of saying "with all my heart or might." Paul held nothing back in his devotion to his Lord. As the Romans cannot actually see him, Paul calls God as his witness that he continually prays for their well-being. His missionary plan includes a visit to Rome and then to Spain (Romans 15:23-24); but he is waiting for God to open the way, and other priorities keep interfering (verse 13).

Verses 11-13. The purpose of Paul's proposed visit is both to help strengthen the Roman

Christians in the faith and to be encouraged himself as well. He recognizes that both he and they have need of spiritual power and stimulation from the outside and that the Christians in Rome can teach him as well as learn from him. Moreover, as Paul hopes eventually to go beyond Rome to Spain, he probably plans to use Rome as a base from which he can draw spiritual support. Since Paul is writing from Corinth, the "spiritual gift" (verse 11) could well refer to the discussion of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 and 13, with emphasis on the primacy of love. There may be some hard feelings among the Roman Christians, now embroiled in controversy over observance of the law. The obstacles to Paul's earlier arrival are not mentioned here but can be seen in 2 Corinthians 11:24-28. He has won Gentile converts in other places and longs to reap a similar harvest in Rome, a Gentile city and the capital of the Mediterranean world. Paul's reference to "brothers and sisters" recalls Jesus' words: "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:35)

Verses 14-15. Paul's debt is the obligation he feels to share the good news with all classes of people in Roman society. These included the cultured (Greeks) and the uncultured (barbarians, those who spoke other languages and were on the margins of Roman society), the highly educated (wise) and the slaves and working class who lacked the advantage of education (foolish).

Verses 16-17. Here Paul states the basic twofold purpose of his letter: to explain the gospel he plans to preach in both Rome and Spain when he gets there and to provide a basis for the unity of Jews and Gentiles in the church, that is, salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. The central themes of this message, developed later in the

letter, are stated here as (1) the power of God, (2) salvation through faith, (3) the oneness of Jew and Gentile, and (4) the righteousness of God.

God is more powerful than the might of Rome. Thus Jew and Gentile alike may be saved by grace through faith in the death and resurrection of Christ. The life of righteousness through faith was known to the Jews, as the quotation from Habakkuk 2:4 in verse 17 reveals. But now this life is available to "everyone who has faith" (verse 16). No one need be ashamed of the good news! Everyone can claim it!