

Romans Unwrapped

Preface

There are a number of things that the world desperately needs. Another study of the letter of the apostle Paul to the Romans is probably not among them. But I've written one anyway. Nor is this the end of my tendency to test people's patience. The book has been written as though it is by Paul himself. I can imagine what some might say about this. My defence is that I wanted to take the underlying stories seriously and writing in the first person seemed the best way to do this. I hope that this way of doing things will make Paul, his greatest letter and his patterns of thought, a little more accessible.

Thanks are due to a number of people. The council of the Bristol Baptist College allowed me sabbatical leave during which I wrote the first draft. My colleagues at the college and our partners at Trinity College, Bristol, did lots of my work while I was away. The people who first taught me Romans inspired me with a passion to understand the letter; they are Dr Larry Kreitzer, Mr Robert Morgan, Professor Christopher Rowland and Professor N. Tom Wright whose lectures on Romans I enjoyed so much while an undergraduate in Oxford. Then there are the students who have taken my Romans module for the last decade or so. In addition, I am grateful to the wonderful people at BRF who have supported this project. Finally, there are the members of my family who have had to put up with me while I have tried to write. Needless to say, while all these wonderful people have, in their different ways, been an enormous help and encouragement to me, the study, along with its eccentricities and any errors it makes in its understanding, is my own. I'm happy to share any credit that might be reckoned to me, but any condemnation, I bear on my own.

This is not intended to be an academic exercise. I have not tried to reference or defend all the opinions that are expressed. It is intended for pastors and other teachers who want a fresh approach to the letter that will enable them to teach others. It may also be useful for those who want a kind of extended Bible study. It seems to me that Romans is too often reduced to a set of proof texts or treated as though it were a list of theological propositions. If this study helps anyone to appreciate Romans in other, fresher ways, it will have achieved its purposes.

Stephen Finamore
Bristol Baptist College
2021

Preamble

If you've ever read that wonderful sermon by my old friends Prisca and Aquila,¹ then you'll know all about the cloud of witnesses that surround the people of God. In the cloud are all those who have belonged to God and have now died. We're waiting for the renewal of all things. I've been part of that cloud for a good while now. As I've looked on at those still on earth, I've done my share of cheering and, I'm sorry to say, my share of covering my eyes in bewilderment and disappointment. I've applauded when the church² got things gloriously right, and occasionally groaned as it turned down yet another blind alley.

Anyway, it's been a very humbling experience for me to watch from one side while the church read some of the letters that I wrote before I was executed. That they should pay so much attention to the things that I'd written! Don't misunderstand me, I sweated blood over some of those letters. The team and I took huge care over them. We wouldn't have done this if we hadn't expected them to be taken really seriously. We knew they'd be read out in the churches they were sent to and then in some of the neighbouring congregations too. But none of us anticipated that they would have quite the influence that they have had. Indeed, every now and again, some new saint arrives in the cloud and after a while comes to find me. They make a point of saying how helpful they found the letters. Of course, sometimes people who disagreed with something I wrote seek me out to make a point. I've been accused of all kinds of things over the years. Apparently, I'd misunderstood King Jesus, or I'd been prejudiced against women, or I'd promoted anti-Semitism. In every case, we sat down, talked about the context in which the letter had been written and arrived at a place where we saw eye to eye. It's heaven; these things happen.

Anyway, of those who come to thank me, the majority want to talk about the letter I wrote to the Christians in Rome. Up they come and congratulate me on what I'd taught them about the justice of God, original sin, penal substitution, imputed righteousness, the doctrine of election or how to deal with those who are weak in faith. Naturally, I thank them very much indeed for their kindness. I also think to myself how astonishing it is that people manage to find such different things in the letter. Often the things they discover are profoundly true; I frequently find myself wishing that I had indeed written what they think I had. I never have the heart to tell them at the time that the things they had found so helpful were not really the things I thought I'd written. After all, it is heaven – so they'll figure it out for themselves sooner or later. Occasionally, I suggest that we might get a cup of coffee together sometime and when we meet, I explain what I meant. We always conclude that God really is good. No doubt he often guides people to interpret the text in the way that their times demand.

Recently, a number of people have suggested to me that I ought to write down what I really meant to say when I wrote the letter to the Romans. My initial reaction was that this was ridiculous. First of all, we have all the time in the world now; anyone who is interested can just talk to me about it or, in time, figure it out for themselves. And secondly, what kind of conceit would it be for me to write a commentary on one of my own letters? And anyway, I

¹ Sometimes she's called Priscilla. I'm referring to the document known as the letter to the Hebrews. The reference is to 12:1. There was a time when lots of people thought that I wrote the sermon. I wish.

² Church is the word for an assembly or congregation that we use for a community made up of people who follow King Jesus. It's a way of being the people of God.

carefully said all I intended to say when I wrote the letter in the first place. Eventually, they wore me down; some of them persuaded me that I should give it a go, and this is the result.

Paul of Tarsus

The cloud

Eternity

Introduction

My Story

I think that the best way to start is to try to tell you a little bit about myself and the things that were going on when I wrote the letter. The first thing that you need to know is that I'm a follower of Jesus of Nazareth. He ambushed me about 20 years ago and told me that I was to be his ambassador to the nations.³ If you know anything at all about my story, you'll know that this came as something of a surprise. I'd got it into my head that all the Jesus followers were not just wrongheaded but actually really dangerous. Their activities were setting back the great project that, up to that point, I'd committed my life to. And so, I was on my way to Damascus to arrest some of their leaders and shut down their meetings.

You may find it surprising that I thought these people were so dangerous. Misguided and foolish perhaps, but hardly dangerous. I have to think myself back into my previous mindset to explain it to you. I belonged to a significant group called the Pharisees. We believed that God had called our people, the Jewish nation, into being for a wonderful purpose. It was through us that he would fulfil the ancient promises that he had made to our ancestor Abraham. It's a long story but basically, as I understand the text, God promised Abraham that through his offspring, every nation in the world would experience blessing. This promise was one that God had repeated to some of Abraham's descendants and had then underlined in the writings of the prophets and in the Psalms. We were his offspring and so it was through us that the blessing would come. We would be the means by which God would deal with the things that had gone wrong with the world. This would mean that the world could become the place that God had originally intended that it should become. So, you can see that I believed that to be part of the Jewish nation was a very significant thing indeed.

Now, the thing that defined us as a people was something called the Instruction.⁴ This had been given to our ancestors through the great leader Moses, although some of the stories it includes, especially the ones in the book called Genesis, come from periods many years before he was born. Possessing the Instruction was a great blessing and an enormous privilege. It was a sign of how much God loved us and it was the way in which he had set us apart from every other nation. We believed that when we followed the Instruction, we were living in the way that God had originally intended that all humanity should live. To follow the Instruction was true Life. Life with a capital 'L' is not just being alive, it is living as God intended and as everyone will live when God restores the world to the way he intended that it should be.

Anyway, we Pharisees, like all the Jewish people, believed that God wanted to fulfil his promise to Abraham. He wanted to restore the whole of his creation. However, we also believed that this was something he would be unable to do until we, his people, become more truly his people. That is, until the Jewish nation learned to fully keep the Instruction we had been given. We Pharisees thought that when all of us lived this way, God would restore creation. We thought it all depended on us. One major part of keeping the

³ My old friend Luke tells the story, in three slightly different ways in the sequel to his version of the gospel. My first-hand account can be found in the letter I wrote to the churches in Galatia.

⁴ That is, the Teaching or, to use the formal name, the Torah or Law. I've avoided calling it the Law because that makes it sound like it's all legal or full of commandments. Of course, some of it is legal and it does include commandments, but it also includes lots of really important stories too. Although, I must confess, that sometimes I use the word as a kind of shorthand for both the legal provisions given to Moses at Sinai and sometimes for the scriptures as a whole as in 'the Law and the Prophets'. I'll try to be clear how I'm using the word as we go through the letter.

Instruction was that we should keep ourselves separate from the other nations. When we did this, God would be able to act. He would send a person who would bring all his promises into being. We called him the Anointed. Most of us expected that he would be a king. This king would inherit all God's promises; he would inherit the world. As a result, the Jewish people, after all our suffering at the hands of foreign empires, would be vindicated. God would show everyone that we had been right all along, and the other nations would honour us for it. You can see why I was looking forward to it and why I wanted to make sure that nothing ever got in its way.

Now, the Jesus-followers were threatening all these really important things. You see, they were claiming that Jesus of Nazareth was the king who inherited God's promises. Now this, it seemed to me, was dangerous heresy. Obviously, it was well known that he had been condemned in trials before both Jewish and Roman authorities and had been crucified. He had not become king in Jerusalem and established his rule over the nations. Clearly, his followers were deluded. But this did not necessarily make them dangerous. The real issue for me was that these Jesus-followers implied that non-Jews might become part of the people of God without taking on the marks of belonging. This meant that Jewish members of the group would mix with and eat with non-Jewish members. As a result, these Jewish followers of Jesus of Nazareth were not separate from the nations, were not holy, and so were not fully obedient to the Instruction. This meant that their actions were actually preventing the Jewish nation as a whole from becoming what it should be and, as a result, they were preventing God from acting to keep his promises. This was the reason they had to be stopped. With extreme prejudice.

Well, it turned out that I could not have been more wrong. I discovered that God had indeed sent this Jesus and he was indeed king. The technical word we use is 'Messiah'. It translates as 'the one anointed' but it refers to the one that God has declared to be the king. In Greek the word is Christ, so whenever I write about Jesus Christ, I mean to say Messiah Jesus or, more simply, King Jesus. It's far from being a surname, it's a title and I use it because this is the one who inherits the promises, the one who inherits the whole world. It turned out that God was not waiting for us to fully keep the Instruction before he could keep his promises. It didn't all depend on us after all. He had kept his promises in his own way and in his own time because of his own faithfulness to those promises and his own commitment to the world becoming what he had intended it should be when he created it. It was about God, not about us.

As you might imagine, when I learned that Jesus was this king, I had to seriously reconsider some of my opinions. It seems that God was not waiting for our nation to fulfil the Instruction before he acted. He had just got on with it in his own way and in his own time. This meant that the Instruction could not have quite the role within God's purposes that I had thought. It also meant that God had kept his ancient promises. He was keeping his word that, through Abraham's offspring, all the nations would find blessing. Only now it was clear that by Abraham's offspring God meant King Jesus rather than the Jewish people as a whole. People from the non-Jewish nations were indeed becoming a part of the people of God. Even more astonishingly, King Jesus summoned me to be his messenger to those nations. I imagine you can see the irony, given my previous views.

And there's more; the king was alive even though he had been executed. Let me take you back to the things I had believed when I was a Pharisee. We thought that when the Messiah came, the world would move from one age to another. The old age of death and

oppression would be succeeded by a fresh age of Life and liberation. As part of this, the dead would be raised. Some of us thought that only the righteous would be raised, that is those that God wished to vindicate. These would live with the king in his new kingdom. Others thought that all the dead would be raised for judgement; the righteous for their vindication and for Life and the rest so that they might be condemned. We called this 'the resurrection'. I now realise that God's plan was that King Jesus should die and then experience resurrection. This suggested that the new age had started even though, in many respects, the old age seemed to be continuing. There's a tension there. A lot of my thinking and writing is really trying to help the other followers of Jesus to understand and to live with this tension.

When I got to know some of the Jesus-followers, it became clear that they believed that God's Holy Spirit was active among all of them. This was soon apparent in my own experience. It seemed that the Spirit was at work in every kind of people. There were no racial distinctions; the Spirit was active in Jews and non-Jews. There were no gender distinctions; the Spirit came upon both women and men. There were no class distinctions; the Spirit was with those who were slaves and those who were free. And there were no age barriers; the Spirit was there for the young, the old and for every age in between. This extravagant, generous outpouring had been promised by the prophets in the last days.⁵ This was more evidence that the promises of God were being fulfilled even though, in many respects, the world seemed to carry on just as it had before.

This was rather a lot for me to take in. I knew I had to take some time to reflect on it all and see how it fitted together. There was only one place to go. After all, where did those called by God go when faced with something so new? To Sinai in Arabia.⁶ I then returned to Damascus and, only after a further three years, did I go to meet the leaders of the Jesus-followers in Jerusalem. I saw Peter who was the acknowledged leader of the movement and James, Jesus' brother, who was pastor of the church in Jerusalem. I stayed with Peter for a fortnight and, as you can imagine, I learned a great deal from him in that time.

It was during this whole period that the basic background shape to my thinking developed. I suppose I should probably give you an outline of it because it's really the backdrop to everything else that I say. It's the story I use to make sense of the world. It goes all the way back to creation.

Salvation' Story

God made humans for a purpose, and this meant that they were to live in a particular way. The purpose and the way of living were never simply ends in themselves. Rather, they were for the sake of the rest of the creation. Had humans kept to the commission they had been given, they would have been greatly blessed and honoured by God. This is the 'glory' for which humans were made. This is what we need to get back to. Instead of achieving this glory, humans fell short of it; they freely chose a different way to be human and this had consequences for them and, as a result, for the rest of creation. This rejection of God and God's purposes is the way of living that all the descendants of the first humans have embraced. I call this way of living 'Sin'. Note the capital 'S'. Sometimes I use the same word, in an extended sense, to refer to particular things we do that are wrong. I speak of

⁵ The prophet Joel is explicit about this. Luke has written about the way in which good old Peter used the text from Joel to interpret the things that happened on the day of Pentecost when the Spirit came upon those friends of King Jesus who had been with him during his earthly life.

⁶ I tell this story in Galatians. I say I go to Arabia but later in the same letter I refer to Sinai as being there. It may be that you use the word Arabia to refer to a different, or smaller, region than I did at the time.

sin or sins. Really, these are manifestations of Sin. I suppose you could say that Sin is the disease and that the things we do wrong are the symptoms. Sometimes I speak of Sin as a power or a ruler and this helps to capture the idea I'm trying to get at. This way of living has consequences. The word I use to express these consequences is 'Death' with a capital 'D'. This is something that affects humans and the rest of God's creation. One of the ways I find it helpful to picture God is as a judge. When you look at things this way you can say that Death is the penalty for Sin. It's the opposite of Life.

I suppose that that might have been that. However, the scriptures tell the story of God's refusal to give up on his project. God set about getting creation back on track and this meant dealing with humans because we had caused the problem in the first place. The first step was to begin the process of restoring humans to the way of living he had planned for them. God wanted to put them back on the path to obtaining the blessing and honour he had intended. He did this for their sake and for the sake of the rest of creation. His motivation for doing this was love. The name I give to this process of restoration is 'salvation'. It's God's work in putting things right, or getting them back on track, or enabling the universe to be the wonderful thing he had originally intended that it should become. You will recall that God's initial purpose for humans was that they should fill and subdue the earth.⁷ One of the ways I find it helpful to think of this is to see their goal as being to transform the whole of the earth so that it is all like the great park or garden in Eden. This is the programme that humans abandoned; we still had something in us that sought to control things, but we did it in distorted ways. This set us on a kind of vicious cycle where each mistake led to another. Fortunately, God intervened.

The story of salvation begins with Abraham.⁸ He is promised the land and that all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him. I see the land as being the first fruits of the whole earth which is represented by the blessing that will come to all peoples, everywhere. These promises about the whole earth, and about all its peoples, get repeated by the psalmist and the prophets. This is what they mean when they say that all the earth will be filled with God's glory, or that all the peoples will praise God, or God's king will rule the nations. In sending King Jesus, God has made his decisive move in keeping these promises and bringing about salvation. He has addressed the fundamental issue I call Sin, making it possible for people to escape its power. He has started the process of bringing all the nations into one family and, through the gift of his Holy Spirit, he has made it possible for his people to live in the way that he originally intended that people should live. This does not mean that they are perfect, yet. They still do things that are wrong. However, their orientation is changed. It is not Sin that defines them anymore and as a result Death is no longer the final word for them. They experience something of the Life that God intended for all humanity.

So, that was the basic shape of my thinking when, about 14 years after my stay with Peter, I went to Jerusalem again and this time I met with more of the leaders. Although we were all clearly in agreement and were happy to recognise one another's callings and ministries, there were clearly some people around who were unhappy about me. Some of these were at odds with their own leaders. Others were scared that they would face persecution from people who thought in the way that I used to before I was called by King Jesus. It was groups like this who plagued my ministry and were constantly trying to disrupt the

⁷ Genesis 1:28. The creation stories at the beginning of the Bible have always been really important in my thinking.

⁸ At the start of his story, he is called Abram. He's one of those Bible characters whose names get changed. Abra(ha)m's story begins at the end of Genesis 10.

churches that I'd founded. The thing is, they would claim to represent the views of Peter and James when this wasn't really true. However, it was the case that some of the practices they advocated were the practices of the Jerusalem church and of Jewish followers of Jesus in other places. Of course, it's one thing for Jewish followers of Jesus to do this and quite another to say that such things should also be expected of non-Jews if they wanted to be considered as part of God's people. The key issue was always the role of the Instruction in defining and identifying the people who belonged to God. Contrary to what some thought, we all believed that it has a role. You will see from my letter that we disagreed about the nature of that role.

Rome's Story

Now, at the time I wrote Romans, I'd never been to Rome. This was not from want of trying. It was simply that circumstances never allowed it. However, I knew a fair bit about the people there who followed Jesus. I found out a lot from Prisca and Aquila. They had been leaders of one of the groups there but had been expelled from the city, along with all the other Jews, by the emperor Claudius around the year AD49. Sadly, this had happened because of arguments about King Jesus. Some of these had led to unseemly rows in the streets and even to some violence. Most of the groups of Jesus-followers had been led by Jews. Some groups were entirely Jewish and some of these simply scattered while others went into exile together. Other groups had non-Jews in them and, in these cases, when the Jews left, non-Jews took on the responsibilities of leadership. Eventually, some of the Jewish believers from Rome found their way to Jerusalem and to other Jewish Christian churches. It was there that some of them picked up distorted reports about me and my activities.

At last, Claudius died, and Nero succeeded him as emperor. This happened in the early fifties. Claudius' decree lapsed and lots of the Jewish believers made their way back to Rome. These included Prisca and Aquila. We had become good friends and we maintained an occasional correspondence. It turned out that when they got back, things in the Roman churches were very different from the way they had been before they left. Lots of the non-Jewish leaders had done a great job and their groups had grown and were, of course, entirely non-Jewish. Some of them had been influenced by my teachings and that of my colleagues, though they hadn't always understood me properly. Some hadn't quite got the balance right and others had got the wrong end of the stick and were waving it vigorously! Of course, some of the returning Jewish Christian leaders had heard the distorted version of my thinking while they were in Jerusalem or elsewhere and, when they got back, they were very disturbed to discover that teachings associated with me had influenced the groups they'd once led.

So, with all these changes and misunderstandings going around, it was not surprising that different practices emerged among the Jesus-followers in Rome. One group, largely of non-Jews, declared themselves to be the 'strong' while referring to their brothers and sisters in the other group (largely Jewish) as the 'weak'. Not the most helpful terms to frame the discussion. Furthermore, some groups thought that they should look to me for leadership while others were deeply suspicious of me. I'm not sure that any of them really understood all of my thinking.

The other thing it's important to bear in mind is that the Roman groups, especially the Jewish ones, maintained strong links with the church in Jerusalem. There was plenty of trade between the two cities. People and letters were exchanged quite frequently. As a

result, the views of the Jerusalem church had lots of influence in Rome and, given the relative wealth of some of the people involved, some of the Jewish groups of Jesus-followers in Rome had some influence in Jerusalem.

My Story – Plans for the Next Stage

I think that should give you some idea of what was going on in Rome. Next, I need to tell you something of my own situation. I was with the team in Corinth. I was there trying to sort out some broken relationships and to get the church there back on a good path. Over the years I'd written a number of letters to the Jesus-followers in that city. In some of them I really poured my heart out. You may think that I said some fairly strong things in them. That's true enough, though it's just as well that only two of the letters have survived because some of the stuff in the others was even stronger.

Anyway, the team and I had developed a long-term vision and a short-term plan. The long-term thinking concerned our mission strategy. We had reached the conclusion that we had pretty much done all we could in the north-east quadrant of the land around the Great Sea. We had established churches from Jerusalem all the way round to a region called Illyricum, which you would call the Balkans. Those churches were mostly in major cities and ought to be able to spread the message about King Jesus into their hinterlands. And anyway, there were plenty of other evangelists working in that area. We also knew that a mission was going on in the south-east quadrant. Word from there was that churches were being planted in the cities of the north-African coast. It seemed clear to us that we should go west. And, if we were going to go somewhere where Roman rule was secure, that meant Spain. So far as we knew, nobody had so much as mentioned Jesus in that part of the empire.

Our strategy in the east had been to use the church at Antioch as a kind of base of operations. They had commissioned us, sent us, prayed for us and resourced us. We needed to identify a church that could do the same things for us when we went to Spain. There was only one candidate. The westernmost church of any size that we had any contact with was in Rome. So, the long-term strategy was to use the church in Rome as our base for a mission into Spain. This was one of my reasons for writing.

The short-term goal was that I should go to Jerusalem. Not everyone in the team was in favour of this. They thought it would be dangerous. There were even prophecies given – which, let's face it, turned out to be right – that indicated how risky it was.⁹ My friends all knew that I was very unpopular in certain circles in Jerusalem. There were plenty of people there who regarded me as a turncoat. I was well aware of the issues, but I felt it was really important that I make the journey. When I'd visited the Jerusalem leaders, they'd asked me to remember the needs of the poor and I'd promised to do just that. I had gathered a significant collection of money from all the non-Jewish churches I'd founded for the poor in the Jerusalem church. I knew I had to take it to Jerusalem. I hoped that this gift would show the leaders that I valued them and the church there. I hoped it would help bring about reconciliation, if that were necessary. In my mind the gift symbolised the unity of the (mainly) non-Jewish communities I had founded with the mother church in Jerusalem. Sadly, I had a nagging doubt in the back of my mind that the Jerusalem church would feel unable to accept the gift; it would make life too difficult for them with the parts of the local community that did not agree that Jesus was the Messiah. My friend Luke wrote about that

⁹ Luke writes about one of them in Acts 21:10–14.

visit to Jerusalem and describes the conversation I had with James. Interestingly, Luke chose not to mention the collection at all. I'll leave it to you to think about his reasons for telling the story in the way he did.

The Letter

So, with all these things in mind, I sat down with my team in Corinth, and we thought about what we would need to say to the church in Rome. I knew I would need to explain myself to them and this would mean setting out my understanding of what God had accomplished through King Jesus. I was fairly sure there would be lots of common ground and that I could both correct the views of those who claimed to follow me and allay the fears of those who thought I should be distrusted. Only if I achieved all this could I hope that they might help with my long-term strategy of a mission to Spain. In addition, I held out some hope that if my positions were embraced by some of the Jewish Jesus-followers in Rome, they might mention this to the church in Jerusalem which might help me when I got there. Of course, if the Roman groups were to be of any use as a base, they would need to be united and so it would be important that my letter help them to think through issues like the relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish Jesus-followers, including the place of the Instruction in God's overall purposes. It would also be important to try to help them to avoid taking any disagreements into the streets as some of them had in the past. And, of course, I would need to give some advice on getting relationships right between the groups that some had so unhelpfully labelled the 'strong' and the 'weak'.

Clearly, it would have to be a long letter. I didn't set out to write a treatise, but I could see that it could end up looking a bit like one. I knew a lot about the different groups of believers but none of it was first-hand. I couldn't be certain of the details and so any advice I gave would have to be couched in fairly general terms. We sat round a table. Tertius agreed to act as secretary and sat to one side at a desk. And then, as a team, we wrote the letter, though we agreed that in all the circumstances, it should be sent in my name alone. When it was done, we gave it to Phoebe, and she took it to Rome. The idea was that she would be with the groups when the letter was read out to them. Because she had been involved in the discussions which led to the writing, she'd be able to explain any points which weren't clear and emphasise those bits that particular groups needed to hear.

You could say that my letter emerges from the interaction of three different stories; my story, Rome's story and the story of the God who, in King Jesus, showed us that he is faithful to his ancient promises. With those stories in mind, let me take you through the things I wrote.