



Paul's Epistle to the Romans

Introduction

Romans is the first of the epistles to appear in the canon of the NT. This is not because of its superlative excellence, or that it is the longest, nor was it the first to be written but it is because of its significance and uniqueness as a theological treatise that makes it so important, that the early church fathers decreed it should be given this prominent status. The image shows Rome in relation to Corinth, where Paul had spent the winter of AD56/57 and wrote this letter (Acts 20:3). Pointers to this are that it commends Phoebe of Cenchreæ (Romans 16:1), lodged with Gaius (Romans 16:23), not the Gaius from Derbe (Acts 20:4), and he was going to Jerusalem with the offerings he collected in Achaia and Macedonia (Romans 15:26, Acts 24:17, 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 and 2 Corinthians Chapters 8-9).



The author of Romans is the apostle Paul; see the section 'Author'. Although a Roman citizen and being born in Tarsus, a Greek-speaking city in Cilicia, modern-day south eastern Turkey, Paul was a Jew, and he was a Jew first and foremost.

Despite being part of the Diaspora, Jews born and living outside of Judæa, he was proud of his Jewish heritage, identified himself with them as a people and continued to do so all his life.

His father was a Pharisee and Paul was trained

by the renowned Pharisaic teacher Gamaliel in Jerusalem as a young man. Pharisees were well-known for their strictness to adhering to learning and living by the OT scriptures, and Paul had a reputation among his peers as being particularly zealous for life as a Pharisaic Jew. In addition, he was clearly intelligent, apparently being schooled in Greek philosophy and poetry before moving to Jerusalem. However, according to Josephus, he had a less than stylised way of writing in Greek and was not a good orator in that language, but highly proficient nonetheless. His knowledge of the scriptures and other Hebraic writings popular at that time, e.g. Wisdom of Solomon, stood him in good stead in his debates and his letter writing.

His zeal and passion as a Jew led him to become fixated on the destruction of Christianity in its early days until his encounter with the Risen Lord Jesus on the Damascus Road. Although this would change his life forever, and he lived out his remaining days as zealous for Christ as he had been for the God of Israel, as known through his heritage and traditions, he remained as passionate about being a Jew and had a deep-rooted love for his nation that emerges frequently

in this letter and many others. But he was now sent as an apostle to the Gentiles, a commission given to him divinely by the Christ and he would use both his passion for this and his love of his heritage to great effect in this letter.

Paul did not see himself as a theologian as his passion was for evangelism by preaching the Gospel of Christ. His usual method on any of his journeys in any city was to take his message to the local Jews first and then to the Gentiles, especially where the Jews rejected his teaching.

What Paul had found through his encounter on the Damascus Road was that in accepting the Jew Jesus as the Messiah, Paul did not think in terms of moving into a new religion but of having found the final expression and intent of the Jewish tradition with which he himself had been born. He would not have conceived of himself as having ceased to be a Jew, or having inaugurated a new religion. In fact, he remained a Hebrew of Hebrews (Philippians 3:5).

In order to appreciate Paul's letter to Rome there are a couple of issues in his life that need to be briefly stated. Paul had won the dispute with the Jewish Christians and particularly with the mother-church in Jerusalem, over the issue of circumcising Gentile converts, and this was ratified in the Jerusalem Council. Later, in Antioch, it appears Paul's relationship broke down with the other apostles, particularly Peter and Barnabas, which was over issues of the ceremonial law and in particular 'works of the law', where Paul was strongly persuaded to a greater freedom in Christ than others were. However, he wanted to maintain a good relationship between the Gentile churches and the Christian church in Jerusalem, which is why he personally wanted to present the offerings of the Gentile churches to the Jerusalem poor in what turned out to be his last recorded journey to Judæa.

His letter was written at the end of a phase in Paul's life that saw his relationship with those in Jerusalem strained and it reflects his hope and concern for the unity of the Christian movement, and this letter cannot help but reflect the concerns he felt that go beyond the issues in Rome, but which the churches in Rome were a microcosm of those same issues.

By the time Paul wrote his letter, Gentiles were probably the dominant group in the Christian churches that met mainly in house groups. Even those that had previously been associated with synagogues had probably distanced themselves from all aspects of the ceremonial law and this may have made it difficult for the Jews, who had only recently returned to Rome from expulsion by Claudius to conform to as they wanted to retain that part of their heritage. These were probably those that Paul would refer to as 'weak' and the Gentiles 'strong' in his argument for greater understanding between the two groups.

Another big political issue in Rome at that time was public taxation. Jews had been partially exempted from some Roman taxes on grounds that they paid the temple tax that was collected annually and sent to Jerusalem. This had been allowed under earlier emperors but was now an issue that could leave them open to charges of tax evasion. The weaker Christian churches would not want to become caught up in any such public debate and so Paul would offer advice on how they should respect civil government and pay the due taxes.

Chapter One

Paul, writing to an audience that, in the main, he does not personally know, commences his letter in the general style of the day by introducing himself, but unlike his other letters, he does not name any others that are with him. This allows his readers to understand the Gospel he is proclaiming is from his own understanding and not that of others. He clearly identifies himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ, set apart to serve the Gentiles.

Paul soon departs from this accepted style to launch into aspects of the Gospel of Christ that is the driving force behind all that he does and is. The Gospel is centred on Jesus as the Christ, who was resurrected from the dead. Paul states that what he is writing is not new but the fulfilment of the OT scriptures. But Paul wants them to know that there is a clear departure

from Judaism that the Gospel is for all, irrespective of race or social standing. The responses of those who hear the message are to turn to God through Christ in faithful obedience.

Paul then returns to the accepted style of letter writing by identifying the recipients as being the Christians living in the empire's capital city Rome. He then proclaims God's blessing upon them.

Paul gives thanks to God for the Romans and states how frequently they are in his prayers for he has heard nothing but good reports about their faithfulness and work. He then states that it has always been his desire to come to them but that either the work of the Spirit or Satan's opposition has prevented this. But he is coming to the end of his work in the east and intends going west, intending to establish Rome as the base for this new ministry.

Paul concludes the section by introducing the theme of God's righteousness, something he will come to again in greater detail later in the letter. But he starts a new section by looking at the wrath of God that is not an end-time judgement but a reality for those who choose to reject God and the Gospel of his Son.

Paul points out the general wickedness inherent in mankind, that was there from the beginning in original sin and has continued throughout history. Not just Israel, although Israel had the privilege of knowing God more intimately, but all of mankind knew of God and had an instinctive idea of what is right in God's economy. Even though they had this knowledge they turned away from God to establish themselves as god of their own lives and hence the mess that the world had found itself in.

Paul discusses homosexuality in detail, as it was rife in the Greco-Roman world, and something the Christians in Rome would have a natural abhorrence for as many of them had been attracted to Judaism because of their strict moral codes in the first place. Paul also lists a number of other sin categories and shows that God has given people over to their desires as they would then reap the negative rewards of their sin for obedience by faith will lead to salvation but wilful disobedience of God will lead them to his wrath and to eternal damnation.

Chapter Two

In this chapter, Paul continues to look at how incorrect understanding of the covenant requirements of the Jews, both in terms of the keeping of the law and their badge of membership, circumcision, had led to an artificial national pride and an incorrect hope that salvation was theirs by right of being part of the covenant.

Paul points out that as long as there are Jews who sin, thus breaking the covenant with God and bringing disrepute to his name, then the argument that salvation comes by right by simply being Jewish does not hold. Similarly, Gentiles who keep the law, even though they themselves were not given the law, had no idea they were keeping the law but were doing so through their understanding of God's requirements simply because they were created by him, in his very image, and thus had an in-built understanding of God's moral code, could be judged to have kept the law.

Jew and Gentile alike, if they have sinned and have not come to repentance before God for that sin, will be judged by God as sinners. God shows no partiality to the Jews, who had the law, or the Gentiles, who did not have it, in these circumstances.

Paul strongly argues that the Jews' fervent nationalistic pride and their reliance on the law as a written code for salvation was actually a barrier for some, as they had failed to realise their keeping of the law had become ritualistic and they had stopped listening to God's call on their lives, and the need to respond to that, which was the important aspect of the covenant. God is faithful and will keep his promises, but we must keep ours too.

Paul concludes the chapter with a bombshell. He states that the uncircumcised Gentile can fulfil the law, which itself requires circumcision in order to be kept. But Paul, in line with what the Jewish prophets had called for hundreds of years earlier, goes on to say that God, through the Holy Spirit and inferring also through the death of Jesus, has now circumcised the Gentile believers and written his new law on their hearts, thus creating a new covenant, not based of Jewish ethnicity and the written code, but on faith.

Chapter Three

The chapter begins by looking at the faithfulness of God. Paul confirms that the Jew's indeed are privileged people because it was with them that God has established his covenant promises and to them that he had entrusted the law. What the Jews for their part had done was to fail to understand God's intentions; they had clung onto these things as a mark of nationalistic identity and pride, failing to see it was their role to teach the rest the world what it was like to have a Creator God as a benefactor, and how they, the other nations, should live their lives in order to attain it. Instead, the Jews viewed themselves as superior to all other races purely based on a gift of God.

In vv.9-20, Paul draws to a conclusion this first major section of his letter. He asserts that all of mankind, created in God's image for the sole purpose of worshiping God and acting as faithful stewards over his creation, had failed. They were a fallen race, initially through the disobedience of their forefather Adam, but subsequently through their own chosen apostasy. Most had not even tried to seek the God that human logic should have told them existed; instead they sought after graven idols or even aspired to becoming the gods of their own lives. They were now in the dock, where they stood indicated of a capital crime: sin. And there was no defence to be offered on their behalf. Paul uses some very cleverly crafted scriptures to pull together the case against not just the Gentiles, but also the Jews, so that all people were under the same charge and equally guilty; perhaps the Jews more so, for their privileged possession of the law and the covenants. The things that their nationalistic pride thought would defend them, their works of the law, were the very things that were actually condemning them in the sight of God.

The final argument is given at the start of the second major section of his letter and comes by showing that it is only righteousness by faith that will save humankind and not works of the law. Because there had to be some kind of payment in order to appease God's wrath, caused by generations of apostasy, disobedience and sin directed against God, then, in his faithfulness, God offered his Son, Jesus Christ, to be a sin offering for all mankind. Although he had no sin in him, he took on the burden of sin for everyone else and was publically sacrificed by being nailed to the Cross for the propitiation of sin. God then raised him from the dead to take up his rightful position as Priest, Prophet and King, that he could judge the world at the end of time.

Paul's assertion is that the Gospel he preaches does not nullify the law, nor is it contradictory to that which has been foretold by the law and the prophets, but is a continuation and the actual fulfilment of the law that God had given through Moses.

Chapter Four

In his discourse so far, Paul has made the provocative claim that God's righteousness reaches out to faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe, without regard to works of the law. However, he has not yet demonstrated this claim from the OT scriptures. But this is where Paul's Gospel becomes most objectionable to his fellow Jews, both followers of the older ways and fellow believers in Jesus as the Christ. So if Paul is to have any hope of winning the argument, he must make good his claim at this point. Unless he can demonstrate from scripture that a person is justified by faith and not by works of the law, he will be unable to maintain the continuity between the Gospel and his central faith. In Chapter Four Paul essentially turns to that task.

Paul uses the example of Abraham, the forefather of the Jewish nation, to press home his argument. Abraham was revered by all Jews and was held to be the archetypal Jew, a role model for all to follow and aspire to be like. Abraham was faithful, was the one to whom the original covenant was promised, and a man clearly blessed by God.

Paul looks at three key aspects of Abraham: his righteousness; his faithfulness; and his trust in God. At each stage, Paul looks at this in its historical context and draws, each time, on the point made in Genesis 15:6 that the covenant promises made by God were all given graciously and freely to Abraham, independently of anything Abraham had achieved, i.e. his works, and prior to either his own circumcision, a symbol of his accepting God's promises, and outside of the law, which was not given for several hundred years, when it was given through Moses, to the Jews after they had left captivity in Egypt.

Paul also shows that God's promises were that Abraham should be the father of many nations, with no precondition that people should be nationalistically tied to Abraham, but should be linked by having the same trust and belief in God, through faith, that Abraham had shown, and on which the covenant was based.

Paul goes on to show that the Jews can be part of Abraham's family too, and call him their father, but not by their birthright. For Jew and Gentile can only be accepted into the family of God through the acceptance of Jesus Christ as the Lord of their lives, and the fact that he was crucified for the propitiation of their sins, before being raised to life again by the power of God.

Chapter Five

Paul starts the chapter on a very positive note, stating that, thanks to the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross, those of us who have accepted the Gospel message of peace, are now justified before God the Father, and can enter into his presence. We have been brought into a righteous and loving relationship with God through no action or ability of our own; purely through the grace that is given so freely.

Paul then expounds the great love of the Father for his human creation; a love that he so clearly and dramatically showed us on the Cross. The truly amazing aspect of it all is that it did not occur after a period of sustained effort on our part to enter into a relationship with God, but it came when mankind's relationship with God was at its lowest point: we were sinners, idolaters, God-haters; and yet he reconciled us to himself with the greatest act of love ever seen; God came to earth in the flesh and died for each and every one of us.

Paul describes the whole process by comparing and contrasting the first man Adam, with the man through whom salvation would be given Jesus Christ. By disobeying God's commandment not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam sinned. As sin entered into the world, so did death; spiritual and physical. Moral and physical decay set in and the world seemed doomed. Through this one sin, many more people have sinned and the problem just kept piling up, but through the righteous act of Jesus, sin and death were conquered and many people, all who would choose life, were sanctified to everlasting life in a righteous relationship with God. The gift far outweighed the original trespass.

Paul concludes the chapter with a shocking statement from the perspective of the Jews. God gave the law, which the Jews had seen as being the saving grace for mankind, or at least for the Jewish nation, but this was not the case. Not only was the law a tool to highlight sin, something Paul had stated before, but in fact it actually multiplied sin and exacerbated the problem of sin even more. But, just as sin abounded, the grace of God abounded all the more, thanks to the loving atonement offered by God himself through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Chapter Six

Chapters 6-8 are designed both as a spectacular exposition of the Christian life in their own terms and as a way of taking forward the thrust of the whole letter, of which they form a central part.

Paul frames the account in similar terms to the Exodus, where God had heard his people Israel groaning under their bondage to slavery, (sin in Paul's letter); he sent Moses, (Jesus in Romans), to rescue them; he brought them out of the land of slavery by passing through the Red Sea, (Paul tells how baptism frees us from being slaves to sin, as explained in this chapter); the law was given to the Israelites at Mount Sinai, (Paul discusses wrestling with problems of the law in Chapter 7); then God leads his people, (now the whole of creation according to Paul), into the Promised Land, (a life shared, i.e. in relationship with God, eventually to become eternal life on a renewed earth, which Paul looks at in Chapter 8).

There are three reasons why Paul has told it in this way:

1. Jesus is the fulfilment of the covenant promises made with Abraham, especially in Genesis Chapter 15. Romans Chapters 6-8 explain the fulfilment in some detail.
2. Many Jews of Paul's era expected a new Exodus, i.e. the coming of the Messiah to release them from foreign oppression, which was Rome in Paul's day. Paul agreed in principle with this concept but not in terms of the political Messiah that most Jews had expected, who would come to oppose Rome, for Paul tells of one that would liberate the whole of creation from the crushing burden of sin, thus offering true freedom for the first time since Adam.
3. What God has done in and through Jesus is the fulfilment of the hope of Israel, a work still in progress that is now being undertaken by the Holy Spirit and overseen by the Christ. The question that still remains unanswered, and which Paul will go on to look at in the beginning of Chapter 9, is: 'what are we to say about ethnic Israel?'

In this chapter, Paul looks almost exclusively at what it means for the Roman Christians to commit themselves to being followers of Jesus. He focuses on the problems that are caused by their inherent sinful nature that has such an impact on their lives, so that Paul likens it to their slave master. Paul also refutes the idea that the Gospel encourages people to sin so that God's grace may abound all the more; bringing glory to God in doing so.

Paul argues that their baptism into Christ should result in them casting off their former selves; that their baptism was just an outward sign of a process that changes them from the inside. It draws them out of the world towards Christ but does not isolate or shield them completely from the world, due to their own selfish desires and nature. He then goes on to point out they are actually baptised, not into the life of Jesus, but into his death. By sharing in his death, they themselves, are freed now spiritually from the death that sin holds over them and, although one day they will die physically, they will remain spiritually alive through and in Christ. Finally, they are baptised into his resurrection that will, one day, lead them to being resurrected into the fullness of everlasting life, in the presence of God the Father.

They have but two choices in life: to be slaves to sin or to be slaves to obedience i.e. God. Although the language may not at first seem appealing, when explained it is clear the two options are poles apart. It should also be noted that the free gift does actually have a cost attached and that is obedience to God; for as was said at the outset, it is not a Gospel where the more you sin, the more God's grace will abound. There are two sides to the relationship, both has its responsibilities to the other. For Paul there is no third option for them to consider. By choosing to work for the master sin, their wages will be death - it has nothing else to offer. By choosing to give their life to God, the reward is a free gift of eternal life through Christ Jesus. A reward that could never be earned or owed, and can certainly never be matched.

Chapter Seven

In this chapter, Paul focuses his attention on the role of God's law and its relationship to sin and death.

He starts with a simple analogy of marriage, stating that a woman is bound to her husband by the law only as long as he lives. Should he die then she is free from her legal obligations to him. If she were to leave him and live with another man as his wife, while her husband still lived, she would be in breach of the law and be guilty of adultery. Paul links the analogy to a believer's baptism in Christ, where he dies with Christ and is then raised as a new creation, freed from the old laws that bound him to the old Adamic era.

Paul then poses the question 'is the law sin?' and immediately gives a resounding no to his own question. What Paul then goes on to argue is that what the law actually does is to provide a means of identifying just how sinful humankind is, and that those who profess that they try to keep the law are, in fact, under the evil impact and influence of sin because they cannot keep the law due to their sinful nature. Thus the law not just convicts them of sin, but is the vehicle by which sin manifests itself within them. That is, the power of sin uses the law as a means of highlighting sin in a person and convicting them of their guilt.

Paul then goes on to defend the law itself as being good, holy, and pure; for it is God's law. The real culprit, the villain of the piece, is sin. And it is the power of sin, not in the new man but that part which is still in the old era, the flesh, where sin can dwell and be so destructive. Paul then illustrates, through what appears to be a personal testimony, the struggle that Israel had as being righteous in trying to keep the law, and yet failing through their sinful nature of the flesh. This similarly applies to Christian believers who, although a new creation in Christ, are still drawn by their desires and lusts to those aspects of the world that are sinful.

Paul concludes with an almost pitiful description of mankind, stating that although they know what is right and want to do what is right, they still do what is wrong due to the grip that sin has over them. 'Can anyone be saved from this evil?' Paul cries out, in frustration as much as anguish. This time he answers by way of giving thanks to God through Christ Jesus.

Chapter Eight

Paul, having given a full explanation of the doctrine of justification and the need for sanctification in Jesus, now moves to the consolation of the Lord's people, a subject that appears close to the heart of God: <<Comfort, comfort my people, says your God>> (Isaiah 40:1). This chapter is a great consolation to us all, especially those who have the great privileges given to us so freely through grace as to be called God's people now.

The sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross and his subsequent resurrection dealt sin and death a mortal blow, thus freeing all believers from the burden of their sin and releasing them from the control of their sinful nature. Although believers remain in the mortal body and thus are subject to sin and death, they are no longer controlled by it, and Paul can claim there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Paul then moves on to the tension of sin and Spirit in the two 'I's. The one that follows the ways of their sinful nature will find themselves trapped in sin, decay and death. But those who give themselves over to the Spirit of God that dwells within them, who have chosen to accept Christ as their Lord and Saviour, have life; life in this time and everlasting life beyond.

Those who have received the Spirit by accepting Christ have now become sons of God, both men and women, giving them eternal access to the Father providing they continue to walk in the way of the Spirit, which leads to life. Not only do they have the reward of sonship but are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ over all creation in the kingdom of God, on the understanding they are prepared to share in Christ's suffering and death.

Creation is groaning under the weight of decay, misuse and devastation. Believers, too, are groaning as they remain in this time of unfulfilled salvation, at one with the risen Lord but not yet in receipt of the resurrection body that will truly release them from oppression and temptation. In the meantime, they are in the world as beacons for God to the world, and the firstfruits that will be part of the renewal of creation when it comes. In the meantime the Spirit will groan on their behalf as they struggle to ask God for what they truly need.

Paul concludes the chapter and the section on a high. God is for us so who can oppose us. There is nothing in this world or indeed in the whole cosmos, the whole of creation including those forces who oppose God that can separate us from God and the love of Christ Jesus our Lord.

Chapter Nine

Paul starts this chapter with an impassioned hope that his fellow countrymen, that is, the Jewish nation, including those in Palestine and those of the Diaspora, would turn to Christ for their own salvation just as Paul had done. After all, they were indeed the nation that God had chosen for himself. He had raised up the nation from one man, had brought them out of slavery, given them a homeland and a law to abide by. It was through this nation that the Christ would come into the world.

Paul then states that God's covenant promise had not failed for it was never intended that the children of God would be all those who were physical descendants of Abraham, and it can be clearly seen that the seed of promise was actually by election through the line of Abraham and was never intended to be all the descendants. This is something that continued beyond the era of the Patriarchs. Paul sees two distinct families through Abraham: those who can trace their ancestry to him and those that were predestined by God to be part of the family of faith.

Paul then goes on to show that God is not unjust nor does he choose people on the basis of their human abilities or achievements. He chooses them because he is God and all creation is in his hands. Paul uses the illustration of a potter making various objects to show that God can create anything or anyone for any purpose he chooses. He can even totally reshape them should he choose to do so and creation has no right and would be very foolish to challenge him over his decisions.

Paul then cleverly crafts the passage from the prophet Hosea with two from Isaiah to support and further illustrate the point he is making. It also demonstrates to the reader that what Paul was saying was there in scripture all along for many generations of the Jews to see, but they had misunderstood the scriptures and gone off in the wrong direction.

Unfortunately the chapter concludes just as Paul starts another phase of the argument that continues into Chapter 10. Here Paul shows that the Gentiles were chosen by faith even though they had never sought righteousness from God, mainly because of their ignorance. The Jews, who had sought the righteousness of God, failed to achieve it because of their misunderstanding of scripture, their role and the privileges given to them, and their persistence in seeking the righteousness of the law but not the righteousness of God. Paul concludes with another passage from Isaiah that refers to the Messiah, i.e. Jesus, and points out that for many in Israel he will be a stumbling block and that only a remnant of genetic Israel were destined to be saved by God to become a part of his true family.

Chapter Ten

The first four verses conclude Paul's argument from the previous chapter and he does so with an impassioned plea that the Jews may be saved from their ignorance of the righteousness of God, which their zeal for God's law has blinded them to.

In the next passage of vv.5-13, Paul cleverly combines his own interpretation of prophecies by Moses and Joel to demonstrate the contrast between the righteousness that is by faith and the

righteousness that comes from the law. Paul is saying that it is not obedience to the law the Jews should have been striving for but obedience to God through the righteousness of faith. He then uses a well known scripture which states that everyone, i.e. all creation and therefore Gentile as well as Jew, who call upon the name of the Lord will come into and under God's saving grace.

Paul then again calls on the scriptures that had been in the possession of the Jews for many generations to show two things: firstly, that it was well documented that God was one and that he was the God of all, i.e. his promises to Abraham were for all who would turn to God; and, secondly, that the prophets had clearly shown that Israel would fail to understand these scriptures, and would therefore fall from grace for their dogmatic determination to blindly follow their own interpretation of the law.

Paul then underpins his argument by calling on all three major sections of the OT: the law (Deuteronomy Chapter 32); the writings (Psalm 19), and the prophets (Isaiah Chapter 65). The readers of this letter in Rome, whether Jew, proselyte or God-worshipper, who were clearly familiar with the OT scriptures would have been well aware of the significance of the way Paul was crafting his argument as this major section reaches its climax in Chapter 11.

Chapter Eleven

Paul opens the chapter with a rhetorical question asking if God has cast off the unbelieving Jews in favour of the Gentiles for good. Paul immediately responds passionately and with outright indignation that God would never do that. He then goes on to give an account from scripture of Elijah's time when he felt isolated in the face of persecution by Ahab and Jezebel only for God to reassure him that he has set apart a remnant of Israel for himself. There are still more Jews who would come to faith in Christ in the fullness of time.

Paul then goes on to explain, still using scripture, that Israel had misunderstood their own calling by misunderstanding scripture itself, and had pursued righteousness and obedience through works of the law. For this reason God had hardened their hearts so that they would remain in their misunderstanding when Jesus came and could not therefore recognise him for who he was, they would disown their long awaited Lord and Saviour.

Paul then uses two agricultural metaphors. The first is the idea of offering the first fruits of the crop, a concept familiar to Jews and others versed in OT scripture, and seen as a requirement of the law that would bring blessing to their crops and, at the same time, would honour God. This in fact was misunderstood by the Jews and was a way of ensuring that God's true people, his crop, were holy through the offering of the firstfruits; initially this was Jesus on the Cross but also those early Jews who came to faith in Jesus as the Christ.

He then moves to the idea of grafting branches into an olive tree. It was well known in Mediterranean countries that cultivated olives were fruitful but not as strong as those that grew in the wild. However, the latter bore little fruit and that which it did was often bitter. So what horticulturists did was to graft in the fruitful, cultivated shoots as branches into the vigorous wild olive. This would produce a strong tree with a bountiful crop. In the analogy, Paul quite deliberately reversed the process to show that, although the Jews were the vigorous but cultivated tree, through having the law, scriptures and other privileges, God would cut off the branches of those who did not turn to Christ, the ones whose hearts he had hardened, and would graft in wild branches, i.e. the Gentile believers, who would still be fruitful as they fed off the cultivated root, i.e. spiritual Israel and the covenant promises made to Abraham. Paul was careful to point out though that Gentiles should not make the same mistakes as the Jews and become complacent or arrogant about their place in the tree, as God could just as easily cut them off again if their faith became unbelief. Paul also made it known that it would be easy for God to re-graft in the branches that had been chopped off if the unbelieving Jews came to faith, as the hardening of the hearts, of some of them at least, was only temporary.

Paul then unravels the mystery of why God had acted in this way. Had the Jews believed in Christ from the start then his death and resurrection, if even needed, would have been seen just as an extension to their already perceived nationalistic privileges, and that any Gentiles that came to faith in Christ would be second class Christians, with the Jews taking primacy. By hardening the hearts of the Jews and excluding them from the family, God gave the Gentile world the opportunity to come to faith on equal terms with the Jews to make a single family once those Jews, the remnant that God had said he would save, were finally brought in, which will occur either during the church age, or at least before the final day. Gentiles were warned, however, not to reverse roles with the Jews in order to make themselves the primacy in the church with Jews secondary. For in the church of Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile.

Paul ends the chapter with words of praise to God from Isaiah, Job and himself.

Chapter Twelve

It is all too easy for people to be influenced by the world and what is going on around them. The world changes, standards of morality, behaviour and expectations change, but it is vitally important that Christians approach life with a renewed mindset, the mind of Christ, and to do so as a living sacrifice, a fragrant offering of the whole self - body, mind and soul - fully given over to God's will and purpose.

It is extremely important that Christians understand the world as it is today, especially if they are to communicate the Gospel effectively to those who share life with them; however, God and his message do not change and there are limits as to how far Christians can conform to the cultural norms of the world. They are not to be the people that society perhaps expects them to be, but people who reflect what God has done for them and, indeed, for all mankind.

Paul picks up on the theme of Jesus' own teaching that love is the essence of life: <<For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life>> (John 3:16), is not just a catchy phrase to put on notice boards outside church buildings; it is a life-changing statement, and something so profound about the nature of God that every human being needs to understand. Paul uses this theme in his letter to the Roman church by stating that it is love that underpins all the other aspects of church life. In order for all the congregational members to be able to live as part of the body of Christ, they need to understand not only their own role but that of others, to be able to support them in their role and to have genuine concern for them, celebrating their achievements, encouraging each other in their growing and supporting each other through times of trial; all that has to be truly understood in terms of humility, which is essential if the church model is to fulfil what Jesus intends it to be.

Paul starts by explaining how the relationships should work within the church and how believers should interact with each other. He then goes on to speak about how they should interact with the wider community, and also with the authorities. Paul anticipates persecution in the churches and encourages the congregations to respond to such treatment with love and not to look for revenge. Although they are to promote good and to resist evil, they are to show kindness to their enemies in the hope this will turn them away from their own evil desires in order to receive the love of God in their own hearts.

Chapter Thirteen

God wants his created world to be well ordered and managed. He doesn't want it to be chaotic, shambolic or run by the rule of the jungle. Therefore, Paul sees the rule of civil law as essential in the fulfilment of God's laws and plans for mankind. He is also of the firm conviction that all civil authorities generally are an implementation of God's will. He has set them up for the good of his creation and this applies equally whether they work for the good of the people they serve or not. After all, they, like everyone else, will one day be judged by God for what they have and have not done according to their calling.

Paul further advocates Christian compliance with the rule of civil law, in as far as it does not directly oppose the rule of God. This is in order that Christians may lead, not so much a peaceful life for themselves, but that they are not seen as trouble-makers by the civil authorities, and are then left to share the Gospel in their communities. Although Paul's imprisonment and sufferings did so much to advance the Gospel, as did of course the sufferings of Jesus himself, it would serve little purpose for all Christians to be locked up, as there would then be no one to spread the Gospel of Christ for one thing! Also, it would do no good at all to attract the wrong sort of attention as that would deflect from the message of the Gospel that they would want to be heard and seen in action.

Paul expands further on the issue of civil obedience by clearly stating that Christians should pay any taxes that are due, whether they consider them to be fair or not, and to ensure that all their financial debts are cleared.

The one debt Paul acknowledges that will not be paid is the debt of love. The whole Christian life can be summed up in the way believers love one another and those around them. Just as Jesus had done in his time, Paul sums up the fulfilment of the law in the ancient commandment to: <<love your neighbour as yourself>> (Leviticus 19:18).

Paul then continues with an exhortation to show what Christian living should be like in the dawn of a new era, which was brought in with the death and resurrection of Christ. The rest of the world were and are still living in the old era of darkness, sin and death; whereas the Christian should be living in the light that can only be obtained by putting on Christ Jesus as Lord.

Chapter Fourteen

It is certain that nothing is more threatening or more often fatal to Christian societies than the contentions and divisions of their members. This chapter, rightly understood, made use of, and lived up to, would set things to rights and heal all church groups.

It is likely that the early Roman church was made up of purely Jewish converts, who then quite correctly invited Gentiles into the church. In AD49 many Jews were expelled from Rome by Claudius Cæsar, leaving the Gentiles to grow the church for at least the following five years. Therefore, the church congregations had a heavy bias toward Gentiles but there were still a significant number of Jewish Christians, who had returned after the death of Claudius and who still kept the Ceremonial laws with regards to special days and dietary requirements, which seem to be the main points of contention in this chapter.

Paul wants to encourage those who are strong in their faith, and who know the true freedom that the Gospel provides, not to try to impose their freedom on others of lesser faith, especially those who found it necessary to hold on to the traditions of their Jewish heritage. In addition, those who believed in a narrow, more restrictive Christianity were not to impose their beliefs on those that enjoyed more freedom. The worst aspect of either viewpoint was if the actions of the one were to cause the other to withdraw from their position of faith. Paul's readers are reminded that the primary purpose of being a Christian is to do the Lord's will and that includes supporting and encouraging all others, not trying to put them down.

This chapter is a very strong exhortation promoting church unity, irrespective of levels of faith, ethnic origin or social standing. It is also important for non-believers to be able to view a unified church; otherwise, they would have no desire to investigate the faith in the first place. Paul alludes directly to the teaching of Jesus on themes such as love your neighbour, support for the weak and that people are more important than rules and ceremonies.

Chapter Fifteen

The chapter commences with Paul wrapping up the arguments from the previous chapter by clearly stating that both the weak and the strong have a responsibility to uplift and support the other, for all are one in Christ, and it is to him believers should look; not to their own hearts' desires. Paul supports this by once again supplying some cleverly crafted scriptures and a further prayer to God.

Paul then gives a brief summary of his mission and ministry to date; that he has brought the word of God all the way from Jerusalem right the way round to Illyricum, forming an arc around the whole north eastern Mediterranean Sea area, visiting places where no other apostle had brought the Gospel of Christ. Paul is clearly boasting, not in himself but in the power and majesty of Christ that has been working through him, in order to bring many Gentiles to a position, not just of believing in God but being made presentable to him.

Paul then goes on to the main reason for writing his letter to the Roman congregations. He had wanted to visit Rome for some time and explains some of the reasons why this had not yet happened, but now he plans to do so. He not only wanted to visit them but he wanted to use them as a base for his next intended mission to Spain. But before he could come to them, he explains that he has one further important task to complete and that is to take the financial offerings of the churches in Macedonian and Achaia, at least, and possibly Asia as well, to the poor in Jerusalem. Paul knew he would face personal danger from the Jews there and also there was the distinct possibility that these offerings would be rejected by the church leaders in Jerusalem as they came predominately from Gentile believers. Paul therefore asked the Romans to pray for him earnestly and diligently for God's protection on both these counts.

He finally requests they also pray that he will come to them with joy and calls upon the God of peace to be with them in Rome, which was the traditional Jewish benediction, but here given to a predominately Gentile church by a Jew, who was himself an apostle to the Gentiles.

Chapter Sixteen

Particularly during the latter part of the 19th Century there were a number of scholars who contested that Chapter 16 was part of the original letter to the Romans, and that it was perhaps the conclusion to a letter that was written to the Ephesian church. However, this has generally been dismissed due to further analysis that can be undertaken with additional evidence that has since become available to scholars in the last 100 years or so.

Paul starts by introducing Phoebe who was from Cenchreæ, a sea port close to the city of Corinth from where Paul was writing his letter. It would be Phoebe that would then take the letter with her to Rome.

The next section is Paul's greetings to those he knew, or at least knew of, in Rome. This is standard syntax for letters written around this time and it also provided Phoebe with a list of contacts if she were indeed a stranger in the city, at least within the Christian communities there.

In the middle section of the chapter Paul, possibly writing in his own hand, warns the Roman congregations in general terms of the types of danger they will inevitably meet from both inside and outside the church. The letter then concludes with personal greetings from the people who were with Paul in Corinth, and who wanted to send their personal greetings to the Roman congregations.

Many believe the final doxology was added at some point after Paul had written the letter but it does not contain anything to detract from the letter's content or value. In fact, it provides a well rounded summary statement that would come across as an appropriate conclusion to the letter as a whole.