

BIBLE SERIES: "EXPLORING OUR AWESOME BIBLE"

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ROMANS 1 – THE PAGAN WORLD CONDEMNED FOR ITS SINS

We have finished what are called *the General Epistles* and now begin a new section: *The Epistles of Paul*. After reviewing the core of the doctrines given by the apostles who knew Jesus directly and personally (James, Peter, John & Jude), God will now use Paul to give us many of the *details and nuances* about these doctrines.

We can compare Paul's Epistles to the smaller branches of a *biblical tree*. Going upward in this tree, we first find *the deep roots* of the Old Testament, then there is *the main trunk*, which is Jesus Christ. As Eph. 2:19-20 says, "...[we are] fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having *been built* on the *foundation* of the *apostles* [the New Testament] and *prophets* [the Old Testament], Jesus Christ Himself being *the chief cornerstone* [or the Trunk]." We then go up *the thick main branches* which are the Book of Acts and the General Epistles. We end with the smaller branches of Paul's Epistles and Revelation, which more than anything describes humanity's prophetic future.

Now, Paul's Epistles are *unique* because, in the Bible, there is *a warning* about the caution we should have when reading them. One can easily trip up on some of the doctrinal explanations. Notice what Peter warns, "...and consider that the long suffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also *in all his epistles*, speaking in them of these things, *in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction*, as they do also *the rest* of the Scriptures" (2 Peter 3:15-16). Many people have been confused when reading Paul's Epistles, especially Galatians, and fall into *antinomianism*--or the rejection of God's holy laws.

Romans is a good introduction to the topics Paul will discuss in many of his other epistles. It is his *most general epistle*, containing *a basic outline of God's plan of salvation are Jews and Gentiles*. He will focus first on the Gentiles' false teachings.

Regarding the date of the epistle, it is dated around A.D. 57 when Paul was about to take the offering to the poor brethren in Jerusalem (Rom.

15:22-28). He was in Corinth, since Phoebe, a deaconess in the nearby port of Cenchrea would be taking this letter to the Romans (Rom. 16:1-2).

As Halley explains: "Paul availed himself...to send this letter by her. There was no postal service in the Roman Empire except for official business. Public System as we know it is of modern origin. Then, personal letters had to be carried by friends or chance travelers" (*Bible Handbook*, 1965, p. 584).

What was the letter's purpose? Paul states he wanted to visit them in Rome and send this letter to prepare for his arrival (Rom. 15:24-29). He gave them a summary of God's Plan of Salvation for both Jews and Gentiles and how to treat each other (Rom. 1:1-5). He hoped it would alleviate some of the tensions existing in the Church in Rome between the Gentile and Jewish Christians.

What had created these tensions? The church in Rome had apparently been founded by some Jewish converts to Christianity when they were in Jerusalem at the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10). Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, delivered his sermon on that location, and as they witnessed the miracles performed and heard the many testimonies that Jesus Christ had actually risen from the dead, some of the thousands of converts on that day were Roman residents.

Now, notice Paul doesn't mention *any minister* in his epistle, although he sends his greetings to about twenty members there. It was therefore our Church where Jewish and Gentile Christians were taking care of the Church until a resident pastor could arrive. Unfortunately, many of the Jewish Christians had been expelled when Emperor Claudius exiled those of Jewish descent in Rome in A.D. 49. Suetonius, the Roman historian, says it was due to a dispute over a "Crestus" (a variant of the name "Christ"). Apparently, there had been many disputes in the synagogues over Christ, and this had greatly angered Claudius.

After Claudius died a few years later, many Jewish Christians were able to return to Rome but found that the Gentile Christians were now in charge and didn't want to give up their leadership positions. They had assumed an attitude of

superiority and disdain toward them. Paul has to correct this.

Hence, Paul writes to the *Gentile Christians* so they don't *consider themselves superior* to Jewish converts by using the analogy of an olive tree (Rom. 11). He will show at the beginning of this epistle that God is no respecter of persons and that all, Jews and Gentiles, are equally condemned of sin before Him, so no one should boast about his righteousness, intellect, ancestors or pedigree.

Paul begins the epistle showing his attitude of humility and love towards them, "Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:1-4).

He calls himself the "*doulos*" of Jesus--a Greek term, in this case of a "willing" slave. He does it all since he is following his Master's instructions and received authority to be an "apostle" or someone sent with proper credentials by his ruler--Christ. He was set apart to present the gospel, or the good news, which had already been promised by the holy prophets about God's Son. For example, in Isaiah 52 & 53, we have a brief prophetic story of everything Jesus Christ would do for us in this life. He also mentions that this Jesus Christ was raised from the dead and is the Son of God.

Paul explains that this gospel is based on the "*obedience to the faith among all nations for His name's sake*, among whom are you also, *called to be of Jesus Christ*; to all of you *who are in Rome*, loved by God, *called to be saints*" (Rom. 1:5-7).

Notice Paul says *obedience is part* of the requirements for salvation, and here, "faith" means *obeying the biblical doctrines and trusting in Christ's sacrifice and grace*. We also see that for Paul a "saint" is simply a *Church member*, not an ultra-religious or an "other-worldly" person in a spiritual sense, such as a monk or a nun.

Paul then commends them for their strong faith, and tells them of his desire to visit them soon (Rom. 1:8-15). He wants to personally explain the true gospel to them because; "It is the *power* of God

to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek" (Rom. 1:16).

So the gospel aims to guide the person called along the path of salvation. They have access to reaching that goal, but first the opportunity is given to the called Jew, who at that time was better equipped, knowing the Holy Scriptures. However, Paul explains to be a partaker of that salvation one doesn't have to become "a Jew," or be *circumcised* and submit to the *entire ceremonial law*. Paul explains: "For in *the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed by faith and for faith*, as it is written: But the just will live *by faith*" (Rom. 1:17). All now called have the same opportunity through the path of faith to acquire that salvation. No one has privileges, and everyone first needs to repent to walk that narrow path to the kingdom of God.

Paul now answers the question that may be asked: Why are there *so few* who respond to the calling--both Jew and Gentile? Paul says it is due to society's deception, perpetrated by Satan and by the support of the majority of leaders in religion, politics, education, science and philosophy at that time (as it is also the case today). They have become puffed up with their bombastic titles and power, and thus have expelled the true God from the classrooms. The famous French scientist Louis Pasteur once said: "A *bit* of science *distances* one from God, but *much* science *nears* one to Him." Unfortunately, many scientists have not reached his level. That is why Paul condemns the Gentile's religious and educational centers of that day.

He warns: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse" (Rom. 1:18-20).

He reveals the great proof of God's existence is *His Creation*. Philosophers state the hardest question to answer is: "Why does something exist instead of nothing?" Nothing comes from nothing--so there had to be something that exists first. If something exists, it is because Someone previously

existed in order to create it. No one has been able to satisfactorily refute that statement.

He shows two things can be proven through Creation--God's *eternal* power and *His Deity*. His *eternal* power is proven because any power that is not eternal has a beginning and is finite. It is God who is eternal and is the originator and sustainer of all life, matter and energy. We also know something about His attributes by His Creation. He is a caring and benign God who created beauty, function and love in His Creation. We see it all around - in sunsets, flowers, in the delicious food we eat and by giving us *love* to establish loving relationships with Him and others.

Yet, these world leaders, instead of thanking and glorifying God for all this, excluded Him from their reasoning. Paul says, "Because, although they knew God [through their studies of nature and creation], they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, *they became fools*" (Rom. 1:21-22).

The Greek philosophers and educators dominated pagan religion education at that time. And what did they teach? "The pagan world of Paul's time worshiped idols after the likeness of both *men* (Athens) and *beasts* (in Egypt). This *polytheism* was the religious outcome of rationalism, *i.e.* man's trust in his ability to know God apart from divine revelation" (*The New Bible Commentary, Revised*, 1973, p. 1017).

Here we have the reason *why* we shouldn't have images or pictures of Jesus or of the Father, because *idolatry* not only consists of making an image of a false god, but also of representing the true God. At times the Israelites made images of the true God, and were always punished and called idolaters for doing so (See Ex. 32:8; Dt. 4:12-19; Judges 17:4-6; 1 Kings 12:28; Ps. 106:19-20).

These false philosophies, without lasting values, would lead to ideas that everything is *relative* and eventually lead to unbridled passion. After all, it was in Greece where the words "venereal disease" emerged, from Venus, the goddess of illicit erotic love and fertility (originating from Ishtar). It was in Corinth where the word "corinthianize" became a synonym for "to fornicate" from its 1,000 sacred prostitutes. The Greek island Lesbos was so well

known for its homosexual women that the term "lesbian" came from there. "Fourteen of the first fifteen Roman emperors were homosexual," says Barclay in his *Daily Word Study*. Seneca states, "Women married to divorce, and divorced to marry." A Roman lady of high society married eight times in five years.

This is why Paul denounces these sexual perversions that come from the false concept of their pagan religions. "For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due" (Rom. 1:26-27).

The punishment for homosexuality is often contracting venereal diseases (according to the news at that time, AIDS in the U.S. began in the gay bars of San Francisco). It also creates the inability to normally have children or a family, and induces many psychological and mental problems.

Paul continues: "And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them" (Rom. 1:28-32).

This reprobate mentality can be summarized and the comment made by the famous evolutionist Aldous Huxley: "The *liberation* we desired was simultaneously liberation from a certain political and an economic system and *liberation from a certain system of morality*. We objected to the morality because *it interfered with our sexual freedom*" (*Confessions of a Professed Atheist*, Report: Perspective on the News, Vol. 3, June, 1966, p. 19).

Thus, we see the reasons and results of the Gentile world coming under God's condemnation.