

Introduction to Paul's Letter to the Romans

notes on the first video in the series: **Romans. The Greatest Letter Even Written.** N. T. Wright.
Tabgha Foundation, Minneapolis.

Introductory Remarks

A master work of a master craftsman

- Paul draws together major themes of early Christian reflection.
- Christianity has been going on for only 25 years at this time
- He is creating a tradition of Christian theology as he does this.

Romans has played a critical part in the life and thought and work of church over the years

- influenced St. Augustine's conversion
- key texts used by Martin Luther
- important in Karl Barth's theology
- What might happen with a fresh and creative reading in the 21st century?

Shape of letter clear: divided into large chunks

- Chapters 1-4
- Chapters 5-8
- Chapters 9-11
- Chapters 12-16

Themes:

Overall theme:

- revelation of saving justice in the gospel of Jesus Christ
- saving justice = one way of translating "the righteous of God"
- a subject of urgent inquiry of Jew of the day
- They believed the creator God was in covenant with Israel
- Covenant justice required God to aid Israel when Israel was in trouble. When then was God was to be faithful with the covenant with Abraham and help Israel in its plight?
- Paul believed the answer to this question lay in the good news of Jesus

Other themes:

- justification
- sanctification
- Israel

Paul's purpose in writing letter:

- written about 54, 55 AD
- he had finished his work in the eastern Mediterranean.
- was coming to Rome to launch a mission to west
- wanted Roman's church's support for this mission, and wanted them to understand how the gospel worked.
 - one issue: Jews versus Gentiles. In Paul's Antioch church, a problem had been the feeling Jewish Christians should be a cut above Gentile Christians.
 - Roman church had the opposite problem. It had largely been Gentile for many years (Jews had been expelled by Emperor Claudius in the 40's): danger of writing off Jews

Chapter 1:1-17: sets out the major theme

- the gospel is God's power of salvation for all who believe, Jew and Greek alike
 - what is this gospel? God's message concerning his Son: this Son is the Lord of the World
- Every element of this message was a slap in the face of Caesar.
 - Caesar cult was fast growing religion in the ancient world: Caesar was the son of God, the Lord of the world. His accession was "good news."
 - Paul: it is a lie.

MH:

Is it possible to be a good Roman citizen and a good Christian?

Wright:

(we will look further into this in Chapter 13)

No and yes.

Yes:

- if to be a citizen is to committed to the virtues of goodness, decency and honesty

No:

- if being a Roman citizen is to worship at the shrine of Caesar.
- The temples at Corinth and Ephesus are blasphemy.
- Caesar is not Lord; Jesus is Lord.

(8:22:) KM:

Is the gospel about effect of Jesus in my life, the forgiveness of sins, or is the gospel about obedience?

Wright:

The word **obedience**: no one English word corresponds.

Elements for Paul include:

- to hear and obey
 - listen to the with the view of it changing your life
 - listen to it as something that will become a part of who you are

Announcement of gospel creates this obedience of faith.

- this is not what justifies us
 - gospel reaches out and grabs us
 - gospel is God's gift
- Gospel is not about me, it is about Jesus: the royal announcement that Jesus is Lord. In making this announcement, the hearer, in Wesley's words, finds their hearts "strangely warmed"
 - From this, one of the first things that flows is "covenant obedience," which is faith.
 - It is not what earns you the gospel, it is what the gospel creates in you

(10:58) MH:

Did Paul change the message of Jesus?

Wright:

- Jesus and Paul were not out to teach a complete religious package.
 - Jesus: the kingdom is happening right now, get on board. It was a message delivered to his fellow Jew.
 - Paul: was directing this same message to the Gentiles.
 - Jesus, for example did not mention homosexuality because it was not a problem in Israel. But it was a major problem in the Greco-Roman world.
- Paul is the obedient servant implementing the achievement of Jesus.

(13:13) KM:

Have we focused too much on the ideas of forgiveness and sacrifice in Romans?

Wright:

- gospel is *not* merely the system, the means whereby:
 - how you get justified
 - how you get saved
 - how you get righteous with God.
- rather Gospel:
 - tells us Jesus is Lord.

- Then a power is let loose that by announcement.

(15:11) MH:

How did the people Paul is writing to get to be Christians?

Wright: We don't know for sure.

- Peter likely had preached in Rome before the writing of Romans.
 - Peter may have gone to Rome after he got out of prison as described in Acts 12
 - There were riots in Rome in the late 40's at the instigation of "Chrestus"
- There was a lot of travel in the ancient world, and Paul did personally know some people in Rome

(16:46) KM:

Habakkuk's idea of "the just shall live by faith" (Habakkuk 2:4) and what Paul means when he quotes Habakkuk in Romans 1:17 don't seem to jive.

Habakkuk seems to be talking about God delivering, bringing justice. Habakkuk is not worried about his own state before God.

Wright:

Paul understood what Habakkuk meant, the problem is that we have been misreading Paul.

- Habakkuk was facing national catastrophe. A major invasion going on
- Habakkuk's question: How long O Lord, will this go on?
- It is a question of God's covenant justice. How is God being faithful to the covenant?
- Habakkuk is told, yes, this is a difficult time, but my righteous one will live by faithfulness, by faith".
- the people of God are **those in whom faithfulness, in whom faith has come to be embodied**

This is a "strange and dark thing" for us. Our usual sense of the meaning of faith:

- believing specifically in something
- trusting in one heart and soul in God, who one is learning to love

for Paul however, there was not a distinction between these senses, and the concept of **faith as faithfulness, as covenant faithfulness**.

(20:14) KM:

You are shaking the ground of our understanding of the gospel. How did we get to his misunderstanding of Paul's meaning of faith?

Wright

- Reformers read Paul with spectacles.
- Romans is not just a book about "me and how I get saved."
- It is an important topic, but it is not the only thing. You need a larger space.

(22:13) MH:

Justice, vindication from their oppressor, has not happened for Jews. There are still Roman troops in Israel. How does Paul address this?

(How did Paul assure his listeners that God is faithful to the covenant?)

Wright:

- Paul redefines the enemy. The enemy is not just Rome. The enemy is the **power of evil**.
 - The cause is not just liberation from the Romans, a movement of national liberation, it is a movement of human and cosmic liberation.
- In 1-4: Paul says this is how God has been faithful to the covenant with Abraham. Paul then takes up the theme of Exodus in chapters 5-8, the theme of freedom from sin, from the law, from death, not just for humans, but for the whole cosmos.
 - This is how Paul works through this issue from the Jewish way of looking at it, but Paul does so with a much larger scale.

(24:17) KM:

This really is a challenge to Caesar.

Wright:

- It is a challenge to Caesar. Caesar Augustus said: I have brought peace to the world
- Paul says: don't look at the peace of Caesar, don't look at the much vaunted Roman justice that Caesar gives, because they claim they are the sons of the God, the Lords of the World.
- There is a **Son of God**, there is a **Lord of the World**, and it is not Caesar. It is Jesus, and the proof that it is Jesus, is that God has raised him from the dead.
- That is where the gospel starts, that is the "launching pad" of the rest of Romans.