

Written for Our Instruction

Theological and
Spiritual Riches in Romans

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INTRODUCTION

Near the end of his Letter to the Romans, Paul sets forth his appreciation for the ongoing power of God's Word as revealed in Scripture: "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope" (15:4). The context of Paul's comment is his exhortation to the Christ-believers in Rome to commit themselves to mutual support and edification. They are to expand the horizons of their concern beyond themselves, seeking to do what is best for their neighbors. Paul holds up before the community the example of Jesus Christ as one who "did not please himself" (Rom 15:3), but who came to give his life in love for others (cf. Gal 2:20; Eph 5:2). He then bolsters his reference to Christ by citing a passage from Psalm 69: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me" (v. 9).

Why does Paul appeal to Psalm 69, a lament psalm? It recounts the plight of a "servant" of God (69:17) whose zeal for and fidelity to God and his ways are met with derision and insults. The servant appeals to God's steadfast love and mercy for deliverance from his foes. The psalm ends with the servant expressing his confidence that God does in fact hear the cries of the faithful who are in distress.

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What is striking is that Paul puts the words of Psalm 69 on the lips of Jesus. That is, he interprets the words of the psalm as pertaining to Jesus. More specifically, he reads Psalm 69 as telling the story of Jesus, whose faithfulness to God and whose love for human beings led to his suffering and death on the cross. But suffering is not the last word. As the servant in the psalm expressed confidence that God would deliver him from harm, so God vindicated Jesus's fidelity and love by raising him from the dead and exalting him in glory. Although Psalm 69 was written centuries before the time of Jesus, its full meaning is revealed in his life, death, and resurrection.

Therefore, Paul can insist that what "was written in former days was written for our instruction." Yet the Scriptures—which, for Paul (as for Jesus), consisted of what Christians regard as the Old Testament—not only find their fulfillment in Christ. They also speak to the situation of the Apostle and the churches to which he wrote. In this instance, Paul wants the Roman faithful to appreciate that they are to participate in Jesus's way of self-giving love, being willing to sacrifice themselves for others. They can do so with confidence, trusting in God to strengthen and vindicate them—especially in the face of misunderstanding and opposition. This is what the Scriptures, here expressed in Psalm 69, bear witness to and teach. They offer encouragement to be steadfast in following the way of Jesus, as well as hope.

Today, Christians read Paul's Letter to the Romans as divinely inspired, as part of the canon of the New Testament. The conviction behind this book is that this letter, though penned nearly two thousand years ago to a specific group of believers, *was also written for our instruction*; hence the title. As Sacred Scripture, Romans—along with the other writings attributed to the Apostle—is a living word that speaks with as much relevance today as when it was first written. It contains much food for thought, for theological and

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spiritual reflection. The purpose of this book is to give a flavor of these theological and spiritual riches.



Among my motivations for writing, three in particular are worth highlighting. First, from my pastoral experience, I have found that many Catholics are not familiar with Paul's writings. There are understandable reasons for this. One is the way the three-year lectionary cycle—which has been a great blessing, offering “a more ample, more varied, and more suitable reading from Sacred Scripture” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 35.I)—is designed for the eucharistic liturgies in Ordinary Time. It presents a semicontinuous reading of the Gospels, with the first reading (from the Old Testament) chosen to correspond, either via parallel or contrast, with the passage from the Gospel proclaimed. However, the second reading, which is usually from the Pauline corpus, has its own cycle of semicontinuous reading. The result is that the content of the second reading does not always fit with the theme(s) of the Gospel and first reading. It can be challenging for homilists to incorporate the second reading into their preaching.

Indeed, the Catholic liturgy privileges the four Gospels. We rise and stand for the Gospel and sing the “Alleluia.” Many parishes use a special Book of the Gospels, ornately adorned, for the proclamation by the priest or deacon. It is fair to say that Catholic liturgical practice makes the Gospels the “canon within the canon,” the part of the Bible to which we give most prominent attention. And this is not unreasonable, since the Gospels set forth the life and teaching of Jesus, culminating in the events of Holy Week and Easter. But a consequence is the relegation of Paul’s writings to lesser attention and focus. My hope is that this book, through its focus on the Letter to the Romans, gives readers a framework for

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listening to and understanding the reading of *all* Paul's letters at liturgy.

A second motivation for writing is that Paul's letters are not easy—especially in the case of Romans. In the famous, if understated, words of 2 Peter 3:16, “There are some things in [Paul's letters] hard to understand.” Since the time of the Reformation, Paul's writings have been the source of much theological controversy. An example is Martin Luther's emphasis on *sola fide*. What precisely does Paul mean by the concept of “justification by faith alone”? What is the relationship for him between faith and works? More recently, scholars have argued over the meaning of his use of the phrases *dikaiosynē theou* (“righteousness of God”) and *pistis Christou* (“faith/fulness in” or “of Christ”). In addition, some people struggle with his unrelenting stress on Jesus's cross. This book will give clarity to these and other issues.

A third motivation is the inspired and challenging papacy of Pope Francis. As I write these words, we are observing the Holy Year of Mercy. In the papal bull *Misericordiae Vultus* (The Face of Mercy), which announced the jubilee year, Francis's first biblical reference is Pauline (MV I; Eph 2:4), where God is described as “rich in mercy.” The Pope also cites Romans 11:32, where Paul writes of God's desire to bestow mercy on all people (MV I8). As we will note, God's compassionate mercy is a key theme in Romans, one the Church and world need to hear so desperately. Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'* (Praise Be to You) is a moving summons to care for the earth God has given to all peoples and creatures for their “home.” Paul's portrayal of Christ as the new Adam (Rom 5:15–21) who has ushered in a “new creation” (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15) is most germane for Christians to reflect on how being good stewards of creation should be an essential expression of their discipleship.

Francis's apostolic exhortation on love in the family, *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love), concludes with his insistence that “mercy

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is the fullness of justice and the most radiant manifestation of God's truth" (AL 311). This document contains the Pope's beautiful homiletic exposition of Paul's teaching on love in I Corinthians 13:4–7 (AL 90–119; cf. Rom 12:9–21). It also appeals to his teaching about the need for "discerning the body" of Christ (I Cor 11:29; cf. Rom 12:5)—understood as appreciating the social character of the eucharistic celebration, including the need to be sensitive and responsive to the poor and suffering (AL 185–86). In these ways and others, Francis draws on issues and themes from Paul's writings, a good reason for setting forth some basics of the Apostle's theology and spirituality via Romans.



In the pages that follow, our focus will be on what Paul has to say about theology (Who is God?), Christology (Who is Jesus?), pneumatology (What does Paul say about the Holy Spirit?), soteriology (about salvation?), and ecclesiology (about the Church?). Although these five topics are not an exhaustive systematic analysis of the Letter to the Romans, they do capture, in my opinion, his major concerns. Each chapter begins with a passage that illustrates what Paul has to say about the topic in question. I then develop each topic via a four-part explanation. Readers should keep in mind, however, that there is no substitute for reading and studying Romans—as well as the entire Pauline corpus.

Why single out Romans? Given the limited parameters of this book, it will be helpful to concentrate primarily on one letter. And the Letter to the Romans is particularly apt for such a focus. It is the only (undisputed) letter written by Paul to a community he did not found. Though he knew many of the believers who, at the time, were living in the various house churches in Rome (e.g., Prisca and Aquila; cf. Rom 16:3–4; I Cor 16:19), he had not yet visited the

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capital city of the empire. This letter afforded Paul the opportunity to set forth in a systematic, sustained fashion “the gospel of God” (Rom 1:1) he proclaims, especially for those who had not yet met him. What we thus have in Romans is his most thorough presentation of what God has done through Christ and is doing through the Spirit.

The Letter to the Romans, however, does not contain the entirety of Paul’s theology (e.g., there is no reference to the Eucharist in it). I will therefore supplement my exposition at times by drawing from other letters—especially 1–2 Corinthians, Galatians, and Philippians.¹ In addition, I will appeal in places to Ephesians and Colossians, two letters that, because of some stylistic and theological differences, are regarded by many scholars as coming after Paul’s death, responding to new situations and circumstances. Even if these letters do in fact postdate Paul (scholars are fairly evenly divided), they are still “Pauline” in the sense of being true to the Apostle’s outlook and spirit.²

While some issues addressed by Paul can seem to be cemented entirely to the past (for example, disputes over food regulations and the celebration of Jewish feasts; cf. Rom 14:1–6), there is a timeless wisdom in his responses. And as observed above, for those who read his letters as “the Word of God,” that is, as divine revelation, this Word is “living and active” (Heb 4:12) today and beyond. Hence it is most appropriate for us to turn to them—and not the least to Romans—to seek their theological and spiritual sustenance. As was the case with Psalm 69 (and for all the Jewish Scriptures of old), they were written for our instruction.

1

GOD

The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable....God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

—Romans 11:29, 32

In Romans 9–11, Paul engages in a long and complex defense of God and the reliability of his Word. The context is a situation in the early missionary movement that pained the Apostle, cutting him to the heart. The proclamation of the gospel concerning Jesus, the crucified-and-risen Jewish Messiah, was not gaining much acceptance among the Jews, whom Paul calls “my kindred according to the flesh” (9:3).¹ Rather, the majority of those who were welcoming the gospel into their hearts were Gentiles. But weren’t the Israelites God’s special people? Hadn’t God made promises to them? What did the (for the most part) Jewish rejection of the gospel, the gospel which Paul had come to see as the fulfillment of those promises (15:8; cf. 2 Cor 1:20), say about God and his ways? Had “the word of God” failed vis-à-vis Israel (9:6)?

Paul argues that God’s manner of choosing and forming a people has always possessed a mysterious quality. Israel’s refusal (in

2

JESUS

The gospel concerning [God's] Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.

—Romans 1:3–4

All of Paul’s letters—both the undisputed ones and those that many scholars regard as written in the Apostle’s name after his death—begin with a greeting formula that contains three elements: X (sender), to Y (addressee), “grace and peace” (that is, the greeting itself). Scholars point out that it is illuminating to see how Paul expands on any of these elements. Such expansions foreshadow key themes and topics he then takes up in the course of writing the letter in question. What is striking about the greeting in the Letter to the Romans is its length—seven verses. And six of these are dedicated to describing the sender, Paul! This is due to the fact that he is introducing himself to believers in a city he has yet to visit. Many of the recipients in Rome have not met him.

3

SPIRIT

[Jesus] was declared to be Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead.

—Romans 1:4; NRSV alt. trans.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

—Romans 15:13

The doctrine of the Trinity—the mystery that God is one in three Persons—took until the late fourth century to be fully developed. It would therefore be historically anachronistic to read later trinitarian doctrine back onto Paul. Nevertheless, it can rightly be said that what would come to be articulated in more metaphysical terminology extrapolates, in large part, what is found in his letters. And, in terms of pneumatology (that is, the understanding of the Spirit of God, from the Greek *pneuma*—“spirit,” “breath,” “wind”), there is no letter more important than Romans. In fact, chapter 8

4

SALVATION

Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.

—Romans 5:9–10

Our study of Paul’s treatment of the Holy Spirit demonstrated his appreciation for sanctification, the gift of the Spirit that enables his recipients to grow in the ways of holiness. Sanctification is one of several ways in which Paul describes God’s saving action through Messiah Jesus. The Letter to the Romans is a fertile source for understanding Pauline soteriology (from the Greek *sōtēria*, “salvation”), a term employed by systematic theologians to describe what salvation through the Christ-event involves. As the citation above illustrates, the apostle maintains that salvation has three “tenses”—past (what God had accomplished through Christ and the gift of the Spirit); present (the current condition of the faithful); and future (the fullness of resurrection life).

5

CHURCH

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

—Romans 12:4–5

We conclude our treatment of the Letter to the Romans by examining what Paul has to say in it about the Church. This area of theology is known as ecclesiology (the term comes from *ekklēsia*, the word rendered “church,” though it can refer more broadly to “assembly”—for example, a legislative body or a more informal gathering of people). To focus on Paul’s ecclesiology is fitting because much of his time and energies were expended on establishing and nurturing *communities* of believers. While he is rightly regarded as a great theologian, it is important to appreciate that he was first and foremost a missionary and pastor. Moreover, Paul lived in a time—unlike our own (at least in the West)—when people thought primarily in terms of group identity rather than individual identity. In other words, one’s identity was understood