

~Other Speakers S-Z: David Servant:

From considering the internal evidence, it is assumed that Paul wrote his letter to the Romans from Corinth during his third visit there, sometime between AD 55 and 57. Paul had never been to Rome himself, but it is clear that he was well acquainted with the Roman churches and the challenges they were facing.

It is thought that initially, the church in Rome was comprised of Jews who continued to keep the Mosaic Law, who then influenced believing Gentiles to adopt the same pattern. So we are going to be wading once more into the now very familiar debate over the Mosaic Law, its relationship to salvation, and the obligation of believing Jews and Gentiles to obey it.

About six years before Paul wrote this letter, all Jews, believing and non-believing, had been expelled from Rome by the Edict of Claudius, due to their vigorous disagreements over Jesus' messiahship, leaving behind a predominantly Gentile church. Claudius died around AD 54, and his successor, Nero, permitted all Jews to return to Rome. Likely there were tensions then, not only between believing and non-believing Jews, but between believing Jews and Gentiles.

Not surprisingly, Paul's letter to the Romans has been twisted in modern times to promote a false gospel that removes the necessity of holiness under a banner of grace that is not grace at all, but a license to sin. As we read Paul's defense of the gospel of salvation by grace through faith, keep in mind that it was an answer to unsaved Jews who believed that salvation was obtained by keeping the Mosaic Law, to believing Jews who supposed that keeping the Mosaic Law was also essential for salvation, and to believing Gentiles caught in the midst of all the confusion. Also keep in mind that the validity of the law of conscience and the law of Christ were never questioned. They were, in fact, repeatedly affirmed in this letter.

Right from the outset, Paul declared that Jesus was raised by the "Spirit of holiness" (1:4), that his calling was to "bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles" (1:5), the believers in Rome were "called as saints" or literally "holy ones" (1:7), and that his gospel revealed "the righteousness of God" (1:17). These declarations and others like it within this epistle were likely an answer to those who accused Paul of preaching a message that nullified both God's righteousness and the importance of righteous living. But nothing could have been further from the truth. Paul's message magnified God's righteousness and resulted in unrighteous people repenting and living righteously.

Paul will later thoroughly establish that salvation by faith is not his unique revelation, but one that is grounded in Old Testament revelation, but in this chapter he briefly introduces that fact, quoting from Habakkuk 2:4: "The righteous man shall live by faith." He then begins to lay down two foundational truths of the gospel, namely, the sinfulness of humanity and God's wrath against that sin. Apart from those twin truths, Christ's death is all but meaningless.

People are without excuse before God for their sin, because God has revealed Himself through His creation, and His disapproval of and wrath against sin is also revealed to them in their consciences and by their experience. Even their bondage to sin and perverse behavior is an indication of His wrath, an object lesson to all. God in essence says to rebels, "Since you prefer to worship the work of your own hands and violate the instinctive code of conduct I have placed in your hearts, I will give you over to your desires so that they will hold you in slavery, pulling you towards ever-perverse behavior, to the point of unnatural sexual desires that are not even found among the basest of creatures."

Yet people "suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (1:18). "Professing to be wise, they became fools" (1:22). The world is full of depraved fools today, who know within themselves that their behavior is wrong in God's eyes, yet who continue in their rebellion as their consciences continually call them to repentance. Yet, obviously, the call to repentance is also an offer of forgiveness. Amazing grace!