

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO PAUL: THE LETTER TO THE ROMANS

CHAPTER 21

WHAT TO EXPECT

The letter to the Romans is unique among Paul's writings, and is arguably the most important. It is the only letter Paul wrote to a church that he did not himself establish, and it is the only letter that does not try to solve the church's problems. Why would Paul write such a letter?

Anyone who can solve that problem will have gained a significant insight into Romans. This chapter argues that Paul wanted to show the Roman Christians that his gospel message was on the up and up, hoping to convince them to provide some support (moral/financial?) for a missionary trip he planned to take further west, to Spain. To make his case convincing, Paul had to explain carefully his understanding of the gospel of God, which brings salvation to all people, whether Jew or Gentile. As we will see, Paul understands this act of salvation in a variety of ways.

This chapter will try to unpack these ways so as to provide greater insight into fundamental aspects of Paul's gospel, including his understanding of the relationship of God to the Jews and of Jews and Gentiles to each other.

No book of the New Testament has proven to be more influential in the history of Christian thought than Paul's letter to the Romans. One of the most frequently quoted pieces of Christian literature during the early centuries of the church, it was awarded pride of place in the orthodox canon of Scripture as the first, and longest, of Paul's epistles. At the end of the fourth century it was instrumental in the conversion of Saint Augustine, a man whose own writings, based in large measure on his understanding of Romans, shaped the thinking of theologians throughout the Middle Ages. It stood at the center of the debates between Protestants and Catholics during the

sixteenth-century Reformation, when Protestant leaders such as Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, and John Calvin saw it as the clearest exposition of Christian doctrine in the writings of the apostles. And the book continues to influence and inspire Christian readers in many lands and many languages today, theologians and laypeople alike, who cherish its words and puzzle over their meaning.

What, then, is this book that has inspired so much reflection and spawned so much controversy? The short answer is that it is a letter by Paul to the Christian congregation in Rome. The historian who comes to the task of interpreting this letter cannot allow himself or herself to be so over-

awed by its historical significance as to lose sight of this simple fact. This was a letter that Paul wrote to a particular church. As with all of his letters, this one had an occasion and was written for a reason.

THE OCCASION AND PURPOSE OF THE LETTER

In one important respect the letter to the Romans is unlike all of Paul's other letters: it is written to a congregation that Paul did not establish, in a city that he had never visited (see 1:10–15). Given what we have already seen about Paul's sense of his apostolic mission, this circumstance should give us pause. Paul's other letters were written to deal with problems that had arisen among those whom he had converted to faith in Christ. That clearly is not the case here (see box 21.1).

Even more striking, Paul does not appear to be writing to resolve problems that he has heard about within the Roman church. The issues that he discusses appear to relate instead to his own preaching of the Christian gospel. This is clearly the case in chapters 1–11, but even his exhortations in chapters 12–15 are general in nature, not explicitly directed to problems specific to the Christians in Rome. Nowhere, for example, does he indicate that he has learned of their struggles and that he is writing to convey his apostolic advice (contrast all of his other letters). Possibly, then, he simply wants to expound some of his views and explain why he holds them. But why would he want to do so for a church that he has never seen?

There may be some clues concerning Paul's motivation at the beginning and end of the letter. At the outset he states that he is eager to visit the church to share his gospel with them (1:10–15). One might think, then, that Paul is preparing the Romans for his visit, giving them advance notice about what he is up to; but at the end of the letter a fuller agenda becomes more evident. In his closing, Paul indicates that he has completed the work that he has to do where he is—probably Achaia (in Corinth itself?), since according to 16:1 the person carrying the letter, Phoebe, is a deacon of the church in Cenchreae, Corinth's nearby port. Moreover, he says he is eager to extend his mission

into the western regions, specifically Spain, and wants to visit Rome on the way:

But now, with no further place for me in these regions, I desire, as I have for many years, to come to you when I go to Spain. For I do hope to see you on my journey and to be sent on by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a little while. (15:23–24)

In light of these comments, it appears that Paul is interested in more than simply meeting with the Roman Christians. He evidently wants them to provide support, moral and financial, for his westward mission; possibly he would like to use Rome as the base of his operation to the regions beyond. But why would he need to provide such a lengthy exposition of his views in order to get their support? Don't they already know who he is—the apostle to the Gentiles? And wouldn't they readily undertake to provide him with whatever assistance is needed?

Paul's lengthy discourse suggests either that the Romans have only a dim knowledge of who he is or, even more likely, that they have heard a great deal about him and that what they have heard has made them suspicious. If this is the case, or at least if Paul believes that it is, then presumably their suspicions would relate to the issues that Paul addresses throughout the letter, issues such as whether Gentiles and Jews can really be thought of as equal before God, and, if they can, (a) whether God has forsaken his promises that the Jews would be his special people and (b) whether Paul's "law-free gospel" to the Gentiles leads to lawless and immoral behavior (cf. Galatians).

The tone and style of this letter support the view that Paul wrote it to explain himself to a congregation whose assistance he was eager to receive. When reading through Romans carefully, one gets the sense that Paul is consciously having to defend himself and to justify his views by making careful and reasoned arguments (e.g., see 3:8, 6:1, 13:7, 14). Moreover, he makes this defense in a neatly ordered way, following a rhetorical style known in antiquity as the "diatribe." This involved advancing an argument by stating a thesis, having an imaginary opponent raise possible objections to it, and then providing answers to these objections. Consider the following rhetorical questions and answers:



SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 21.1 The Beginnings of the Roman Church

The Christian church was already established in Rome by 57 or 58 C.E., the probable date of Paul's letter, but no one knows for certain how and when it first arrived there. One ancient tradition states that the apostle Peter established the church in Rome some fifteen years earlier and became its first bishop (i.e., the Pope). The earliest books known to be written by members of the Roman church, however, 1 Clement and *The Shepherd of Hermas*, say nothing about Peter starting the church there or being its first bishop. Moreover, Paul's letter to the Romans, itself the earliest record of a Christian presence in the capital, greets twenty-eight different people in the community by name (chap. 16) but says nothing about Peter's presence among them.

Some scholars have suggested that the writings of the Roman historian Suetonius provide evidence of the presence of Christianity in Rome at least a decade before Paul's letter. Suetonius claims that the emperor Claudius had expelled the Jews from Rome in the year 49 C.E. because of riots instigated by a man named Chrestus (*Life of Claudius* 25). It is possible that Suetonius slightly muddled his facts and meant to say that the riots resulted from conflicts over "Christ" (for possible supporting evidence, see Acts 18:2). If so, then Jewish Christians would have been active there sometime in the mid-40s. On the other hand, it may be that Suetonius is not referring to Christ or the Christians at all but to some Roman Jew named Chrestus (a name that is otherwise well attested).

One thing we can say about the early history of Roman Christianity is that, at least by the 50s, it was largely made up of Gentiles. This is presupposed by Paul himself (see 1:5–6, 13; 11:13, and 28), who was personally acquainted with a number of Christians there (thus the greetings in chap. 16). But how did this predominantly Gentile church begin? Most scholars, realizing that we can never know for certain, simply assume that Christianity was brought to the imperial capital either by travelers who had converted to the faith while abroad (see, e.g., Acts 2:8–12), or by Christians who decided for one reason or another to relocate there, or by another missionary.

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. For in the first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. (3:1–2)

What then? Are we any better off? No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin. (3:9)

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? (6:1–2)

Since the author both asks and answers the questions, the diatribe is remarkably effective in showing that he knows what he is talking about and that he is always right. By employing this

letter to the Romans is a kind of trial run for presenting his views, an attempt to get his thoughts organized on paper before having to present them to a hostile audience in Judea.

There may be some truth in this, but chiefly the letter appears to be directed to the situation that Paul expects to find where he addresses it, in Rome. He wants to use this church as his base of operation and knows (or thinks) that he has some opposition. He writes a letter to persuade this congregation of the truth of his version of the gospel. This gospel insists that Jews and Gentiles are on equal footing before God: both are equally alienated from God and both can be made right with God only through Christ's death and resurrection. Moreover, the salvation that is offered in Christ comes to people apart from adherence to the Jewish Law, even though the Law itself bears witness to this faith as the only means of salvation.

Indeed, Christ is the goal of this Law. Above all else, the gospel shows that God has not gone back on his promises to the Jews and has not rejected them as his people. In Christ, all of the promises of God have come to fruition. Furthermore, the Romans can rest assured that this gospel does not lead to moral laxity: Paul is himself no moral reprobate and he does not urge his converts to engage in wild and lawless activities.



THE THEME OF THE EPISTLE

Paul begins his letter to the Romans in his usual way, with a prescript naming and describing himself and his addressees, in which he anticipates the central concern of his letter, the meaning of his gospel (1:1–7; see box 21.2). The prescript is followed by a thanksgiving to God for this congregation (1:8–15), in which he announces his plans to

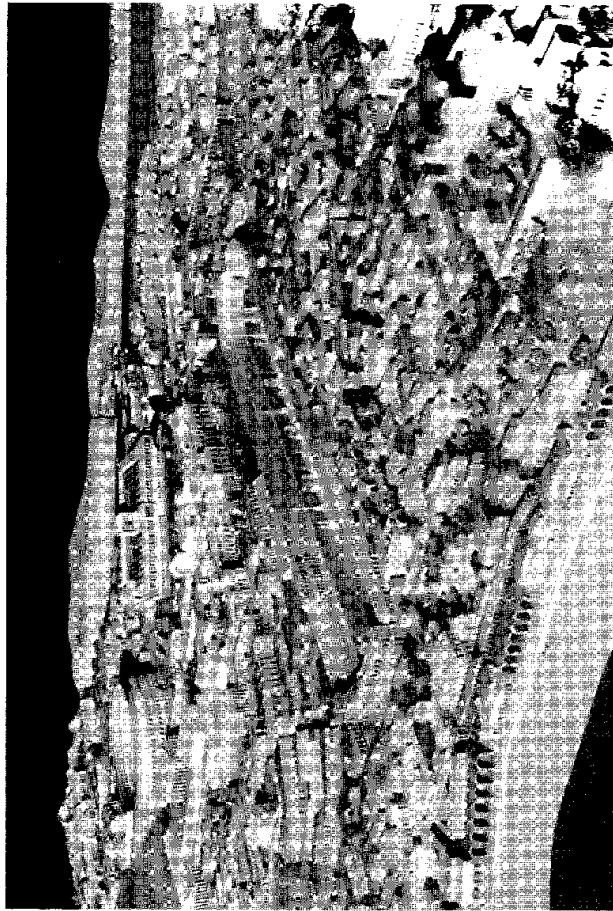


FIGURE 21.1 Reconstruction of central city Rome, roughly as it would have looked in Paul's day.

visit the congregation in order to share his gospel with them. Paul then gives a brief delineation of his gospel in two verses that scholars have long recognized as setting out the theme of the epistle:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith." (1:16–17)

As he is occasionally wont to do, Paul has packed a great deal into these two verses. To help us understand the letter as a whole we should spend a few moments unpacking them.

1. **Paul is not ashamed of the gospel.** Paul may be writing the Romans to provide a relatively full and accurate account of the gospel message that he proclaims, perhaps in light of the partial and inaccurate report that he suspects they have already heard. He begins by assuring them that this message brings him no shame.
2. **Paul's gospel is God's powerful means of salvation.** The gospel that Paul preaches represents God's powerful act of salvation to the world, it is the way God has chosen to save those who are headed for destruction. The

implication is clear: apart from this gospel, there would be no salvation.

3. **This salvation comes to those who have faith.** The English noun "faith" (*πίστις*) and the verb "believe" (*πιστεύειν*) are translations of the same Greek root. For Paul faith (or believing) refers to a trusting acceptance of God's act of salvation. It does not refer simply to intellectual assent (as in "I believe you are right") but implies a wholehearted conviction and commitment. Throughout this letter Paul will insist that a person is put into a right relationship with God not by adhering to the dictates of the Jewish Law but by trusting God's act of salvation, that is, by believing in Christ's death and resurrection.

4. **Salvation comes first to the Jew and then to the Greek.** By "Greek" Paul simply means "Gentile" (since it stands in contrast to "Jew"). The salvation given in the gospel comes to both Jews and Gentiles. Jews received it first, since God is the God of the Jews who sent his Son to the Jewish people in fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures (as Paul indicates both in Romans and throughout his writings); but it also comes to the Gentiles. Indeed, one of

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 21.2 Paul's Gospel to the Romans

Scholars have long maintained that Paul's opening comments in Rom 1:3–4 are not his own words but those of an old Christian creed that he is quoting, perhaps one that was commonly confessed by Christians when they came to be baptized (cf. the Philippians hymn; see box 20.9). One reason for thinking this is that Paul expresses himself here in ways that are quite uncustomary for him, judging from his other undisputed letters. Nowhere else, for example, does he refer to Jesus as "descended from David according to the flesh," nowhere else does he call the Holy Spirit "the spirit of holiness," and nowhere else does he claim that Jesus was "declared to be Son of God" at his resurrection. Why, then, would Paul begin his letter in such an unusual way?

If it is true that Paul was writing this letter to correct any misunderstanding about his gospel message, it may be that he wanted to begin by affirming a confessional statement that he knew was familiar to his audience, so that they would recognize that his gospel was not "off base" but was the same gospel they had come to believe when they joined the Christian church. If so, then we have another indication that this is a letter that Paul spent some considerable care in constructing, giving thought to how he might best win over this important church to support his Gentile mission (see 1:5–6).

PAULINE MODELS FOR SALVATION

Paul's overarching points throughout this letter is that despite the advantages of the Jews (for example, having the Scriptures in which the promises of God are given), Jew and Gentile are on equal footing before God. All have sinned against God and all can be made right with God only by faith in Christ.

5. **The gospel reveals the righteousness of God.** It is right that God should not give preference to his own people? Paul's gospel insists that God is unequivocally right in the way he brings about salvation; that is, he is "righteous" in the way that he makes all people, Jew and Gentile, "right" with himself. This indeed is a major theme of Romans: God has not gone back on his promises and has not rejected his people the Jews. The death and resurrection of Jesus are the fulfillment of these promises, and faith in him is given first to Jews, and through them to the entire world.

6. **The Scriptures proclaim the gospel.** Paul claims that God has been perfectly fair and consistent ("righteous") in his treatment of the Jews and of all people because the Scriptures themselves teach that salvation is based completely on faith ("through faith for faith"), rather than on doing the works prescribed in the Jewish Law. Quoting the prophet Habakkuk, Paul emphasizes that a right standing before God, a standing that provides life, comes only through faith: "The one who is righteous will live by faith." To paraphrase: "the one who is made right with God through faith will find life."

Paul wants to emphasize that his gospel message is not something that he has made up himself. We saw in Galatians that he claimed to have received it through a revelation from God. We are going to see in Romans (as we saw in Galatians as well) that he also thinks that it is rooted in the Jewish Scriptures. In large measure, Romans is an extended argument that Paul's gospel of salvation, that is, his message of how a person, Jew or Gentile, comes into a right standing before God, derives from these sacred books.

Rather than launching into a passage-by-passage exposition of Romans, it may prove to be more useful for us to reflect in broader terms on what Paul has to say in this letter about his central theme, the gospel. (Remember: Paul is not speaking about a Gospel book that contains a record of Jesus' words and deeds but about his own gospel message.) Paul has a variety of things to say about it, and it is easy at places to become confused and wonder if Paul is being consistent with himself. In most instances (I'm not sure I can vouch for all of them), Paul is not inconsistent and is not himself confused. The difficulty is that he discusses God's act of salvation in a number of different ways and sometimes does not clearly indicate which way he is thinking about. In other words, Paul has various modes of understanding, various conceptual models, of what it means to say that God brought about salvation through Jesus' death and resurrection.

There are at least two major models that Paul uses for understanding the importance of Christ's death in the letter to the Romans (see box 21.4). I will call these the judicial and the participationist models (these are not, of course, Paul's own terms). Paul does not see these as mutually exclusive of one another; on the contrary, he sometimes combines different conceptualities in one statement. For our immediate purposes, however, it will be useful to see how the models work in isolation from one another. Both models understand that human beings are somehow alienated from God and that Christ's death and resurrection somehow work to resolve that problem. The nature of the problem and the way Christ has solved it, however, are expressed differently in the two models.

The Judicial Model

Paul sometimes understands the human problem with respect to God and the divine solution to the problem in legal or judicial terms. In his mind there appears to be a rough analogy between the act of salvation and the human judicial process. The way it works, in simple terms, is as follows.

Box 21.3 Two Different Ways of Salvation in Paul?

Some modern scholars have been struck by Paul's two-fold insistence that (a) he himself continues to worship the Jewish God and (b) the Jewish Law can have no bearing on one's standing before God. How, ask these scholars, can he seriously propose (b) if he really means (a)? To our knowledge, all ancient Jews maintained that the Law was given by God precisely in order to show his people how to maintain their close, covenantal relationship with himself. How could someone abandon the Law—indeed, insist that the Law be abandoned—and yet still claim to follow this God?

One particularly interesting solution proposed in recent years is that we need to take seriously Paul's self-presentation as an apostle *to the Gentiles*. According to this view, Paul's letters were written not to Jews (whether Christian or non-Christian) but to Gentile followers of Jesus. It was to these people, and only to these people, that Paul maintained that adherence to the Law of the Jews would have no bearing on one's standing before God. Such people did not have to become Jews in order to enjoy a covenantal relationship with God; for them it was Christ's death that brought them into this relationship. This does not mean, however, according to this view, that Jews were themselves to abandon the Law—or even, according to the most radical representations of this view, that they were to believe in Christ. Why would they need Christ if they were already standing in a covenantal relationship with God? There were, in short, two different paths of salvation: for Jews, salvation came through the Law; for Gentiles, it came through Christ. But since Paul's letters were addressed only to Gentiles, we learn there of only one of the two ways.

This is an intriguing and attractive hypothesis, argued at times with skill and erudition. But other interpreters of Paul have not been convinced. Perhaps the biggest problem is that Paul himself emphatically claims that everyone, Jew and Gentile, is equally guilty of sin before God, and that *all* (including Paul—a Jew himself!) are therefore justified equally—by faith in Christ and not by doing works of the Law (see especially Rom 3:9, 20, 23–26; Gal 2:15).

God is a lawmaker who has made laws for people to follow (all people, not just Jews); everyone, however, has broken these laws. God is also the judge before whom people appear as lawbreakers. The penalty for breaking God's laws is death, and everyone is found to be guilty as charged. This is the human problem. In Paul's words, "everyone has sinned" (i.e., broken God's laws, see Rom 3:23), and "the wages of sin is death" (i.e., death is the penalty for all who have sinned, Rom 6:23).

The divine solution to this problem is again conceived in judicial terms. Jesus is one who does not deserve the death sentence; he dies to pay the penalty for others. God shows that he is satisfied with this payment by raising Jesus from the dead (Rom 3:23–24; 4:24–25). Humans can avail themselves of Christ's payment of their debt simply by trusting that God will find it acceptable. It is not a payment they have either earned or deserved; it is a beneficent act done on their behalf by someone

else, an act that can be either accepted or rejected (3:27–28; 4:4–5). Those who accept it are then treated as if they are "not guilty" (even though they are in fact completely guilty), because someone else has accepted their punishment for them.

This, then, is the judicial model for understanding how salvation works. The problem is sin, which is understood to be a transgression of God's law; the solution is Christ's death and resurrection, which are to be received by faith. A person who has faith is restored to a right standing before God. Sometimes this way of looking at things is called Paul's doctrine of justification by faith. In this model the Jewish Law plays no role in salvation. Those who have broken the Law and incurred the sentence of death cannot remove their guilt simply by obeying a number of other laws, just as a convicted embezzler will not be set free by pleading that he has obeyed all of the traffic laws. The only way to be restored to a right

standing before God (to be "justified") is through the death of Jesus, a payment of the penalty owed by others.

The Participationist Model

Most of us today have no trouble understanding how the act of salvation can be seen as analogous to a judicial process. The participationist model, however, is much harder to get our minds around. This is partly because it involves a way of thinking that is no longer prevalent in our culture. Under this second model, the human problem is still called sin, sin is still thought to lead to death, and Christ's death and resurrection still work to resolve the problem; but sin, death, and Jesus' death and resurrection all mean something *different* from what they mean under the judicial model.

Consider the following uses of the word "sin" in the book of Romans:

- Sin is in the world. (5:13)
- Sin rules people. (5:21; 6:12)
- People can serve sin. (6:6)
- People can be enslaved to sin. (6:17)
- People can die to sin. (6:11)
- People can be freed from sin. (6:18)

It should be reasonably clear that sin in these verses is not simply something that a person does, a disobedient action against God, a transgression of his laws. It is instead a kind of cosmic power, an evil force that compels people to live in alienation from God. The human problem under this model is that people are enslaved to this demonic power and are unable to break free from their bondage.

The power of sin is related to another power, the power of death. In the participationist model, death is not simply something that happens when a person stops breathing. It is a cosmic force that is intent on enslaving people; when it succeeds, it totally removes a person from the realm of God. Here again the situation is desperate; all people are subject to the overpowering force of death, and there is nothing that they can do to set themselves free.

As in the judicial model, the solution has to come from God himself, and it takes the form of Jesus' death and resurrection. If the problem is

enslavement to alien powers, then the solution must be liberation. Christ's death and resurrection provide freedom from the powers of sin and death that have subjugated the human race. How, then, does this liberation happen?

As an apocalypticist Paul knew that the cosmic force of sin was present in this world, but he came to believe that Christ's death had conquered the power of sin. He evidently came to believe this after he believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead. For Paul, Jesus' resurrection showed beyond any doubt that Jesus was no longer subject to the power of death, the most dreaded of all cosmic forces of evil. Jesus had conquered death through his resurrection; thus, reasoning backward, at Jesus' death he must have defeated the related powers (including the Devil and his agent, sin). Furthermore, Jesus' victory can lead to the salvation of others. That is to say, a person can participate with Christ in his victory (Rom 6:5–8); hence the name I have given this conceptual model. A person participates in this victory by being united with Christ in his death and resurrection. According to Paul, this happens when a person is baptized (Rom 6:3–4).

Baptism was a rite that had been practiced among the Christians from the earliest of times. In the early years of the religion, of course, no one was "born" a Christian; new members of the religion converted to it either from Judaism or from loyalty to one of the other cults. Those who converted were initiated into the church through the ritual of baptism. Baptism involved being immersed in water (later sources suggest that running water was to be preferred) while an officiant pronounced sacred words to indicate the significance of the act. For Paul the act was not simply significant as a symbolic statement that a person's sins had been cleansed or that he or she had entered into a new life; the act involved something that really happened. When people were baptized, they actually experienced a union with Christ and participated in the victory brought at his death (in the immersion under the water; see especially Rom 6:1–11).

Although Paul believed that a person who had been baptized had "died" with Christ, that is, had participated fully in Christ's victory over the

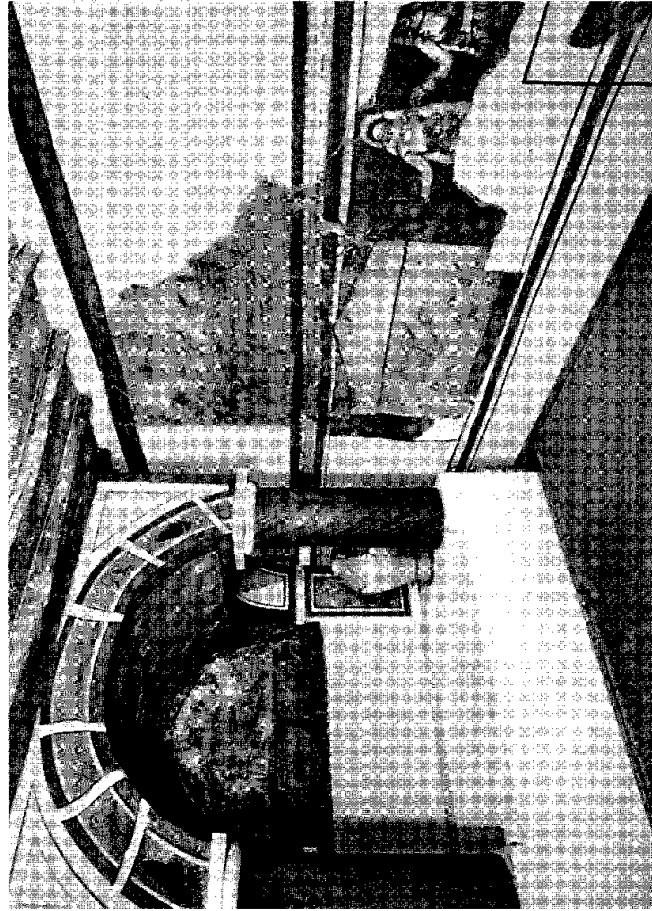


FIGURE 21.2 Baptism was an important Christian ritual for Paul's churches (see Rom 6:1–6), and it continued to be significant down through the centuries. Pictured here is the baptistry of the oldest surviving Christian church (in the city of Dura, Syria), from about two centuries after Paul.

power of sin, he evidently did not believe that such a person had yet been “raised” with Christ, that is, set completely free from the power of death. Paul knew full well that this had not yet occurred since people, even believers, continued to die! So he is quite emphatic that Christians have died with Christ but that they have not yet been raised with him (6:5, 8). They will be raised only when Christ returns and brings about the resurrection at the end of time. (You may recall that the major problem at Corinth was that some people believed that they had already been raised with Christ, and Paul had to insist that this was simply not so.) Until then, to be sure, Christians live in “newness of life” (Rom 6:4), because they are no longer subject to the power of sin. But their salva-

tion is not yet complete, for the end has not yet come. Only when it does come will they “be united with him in a resurrection like his” (6:5).

Comparison and Contrast of the Two Models

The two models of salvation we have been looking at are ways of understanding something. They are not the thing itself. Paul's gospel is not “justification by faith” or “union with Christ.” These are ways of reflecting on or thinking about his gospel. His gospel is God's act of salvation in Christ; the models are ways of conceptualizing how it worked.

The way salvation worked differed according to which model Paul had in mind. In both of them,



SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 21.4 Judicial and Participationist Models of Salvation in Paul

The Judicial Model

Sin—human disobedience that brings a death penalty

Jesus' Death—payment of the penalty of sin

Appropriation—acceptance of the payment through faith, apart from works of the Law

The Participationist Model

Sin—a cosmic power that enslaves people

Jesus' Death—defeat of the power of sin

Appropriation—participation in Christ's victory through baptism

the problem is “sin,” but in one model, sin is an act of disobedience that a person commits, whereas in the other it is a cosmic force that works to enslave people. In both models, the solution is provided by Christ's death and resurrection, but in one Christ's death pays the penalty for human disobedience, and in the other it breaks the cosmic power of sin. In both models a person has to appropriate the benefits of Christ's death, but in one this is done through faith, that is, a trusting acceptance of the payment, whereas in the other it occurs through baptism, a ritual participation in the victory.

As you read through Romans on your own, you can see that Paul does not neatly differentiate between these two models. Even though he uses the judicial model more consistently in chapters 1–4 and the participationist model in chapters 6–8 (to choose the clearest places), he does not ever think of them as conflicting with one another, and he regularly combines the two in the things he says. He would never have thought, for instance (so far as we can tell), that someone could be baptized and so participate in Christ's death without also having faith and so trusting Christ's payment for sin. The two models go hand in hand; they are not so much confused as combined. Their coalescence is clear at a number of points in Paul's discussion. Why, for example, does Paul maintain

that everyone is guilty before God? Because everyone has sinned, that is, committed acts of transgression (the judicial model, 3:23). Why has everyone sinned? Because everyone is enslaved to the power of sin (the participationist model, 3:9). Why is everyone enslaved to the power of sin? Because Adam committed an act of disobedience (judicial model), which allowed the power of sin to enter into the world (participationist model; 5:12). And so it goes.

Despite the fact that these two models neatly dovetail in Paul's own thought, it is often useful for readers to keep them conceptually distinct when reading through his letters, especially the letter to the Romans. Therefore, when you find Paul speaking of “sin” in any given verse, you should ask what he means by it. Is he referring to an act of transgression or a cosmic power? When he refers to the effects of Christ's death and resurrection, is he thinking of a payment of a debt or liberation from bondage? In this connection, I should point out that these are not the only models that Paul uses to conceptualize what Christ has done for salvation (see box 21.5). They are, however, the two that appear most prominently throughout the book of Romans, as can be seen in the following section-by-section synopsis of the letter.

THE FLOW OF PAUL'S

ARGUMENT

- *The Human Dilemma: All Stand Condemned before God (1:18–3:20).* Paul's gospel follows a "bad news, good news" scheme that is designed to show the reader how desperate the situation is for all people, Gentiles and Jews. Gentiles have abandoned their knowledge of the one true God to worship idols, resulting in wild and rampant immorality (1:18–32). Jews are no better, for even though they have the Law and the sign of circumcision, they do not practice the Law and so also stand condemned (2:1–29). Indeed, all people, Jews and Gentiles, have sinned against God (the judicial notion; 3:1–8), for all are under the power of sin (the participationist notion; 3:9). This view that Jew and Gentile are equally condemned before God does not at all represent a rejection of Judaism, however, for according to Paul it is the teaching of the Jewish Scriptures themselves (3:10–20).
- *The Divine Solution: Salvation through Christ's Death (3:21–3:1).* The Jewish Law gives the knowledge of sin but not the solution to sin. The solution comes in the fulfillment of the Law in the death of Jesus, a sacrifice for the sins of others to be received through faith. Performing the works of the Jewish Law does not contribute to this salvation through faith, so Jews have no grounds for boasting of a special standing before God. Jews and Gentiles are on equal footing, all are made right with God through faith in the death of Jesus.
- *The Gospel Message Is Rooted in the Scripture (4:1–25).* The Father of the Jews, Abraham himself, shows that being made right with God comes through faith rather than by doing the works of the Law. Abraham was justified (made right with God) by trusting in God's promise before he was given the sign of circumcision (a "work" of the Law). His true descendants are those who continue to trust in God and in the fulfillment of his promises, which has now occurred in the death and resurrection of Jesus.
- *Christ's Death and Resurrection: Bring Freedom from the Powers Opposed to God (5:1–8:39).* Those who believe in Christ have been made right with God and will be saved from the wrath of God that is coming upon this world (5:1–11). They will also be delivered from the reign of God's mortal enemy, death, which entered into the world through the disobedience of Adam, Christ's counterpart, but which has now been conquered by Christ's own act of obedience (5:12–21). Moreover, those who have been united with Christ in his death have participated in his victory over the power of sin; they can, therefore, and should, serve the new power that is over them in Christ, the divine power of righteousness (6:1–23). Before a person was united with Christ he or she was compelled by the power of sin to violate the good Law that God had given, so that the Law led to condemnation rather than to salvation (7:1–25). But now the part of the self that was subject to sin, the flesh, has been put to death in Christ, so a person no longer needs to submit to its cravings and violate the Law (8:1–17). Those who have been united with Christ will eventually experience the complete salvation that will come when God redeems this fallen world (8:18–39).
- *The Gospel Message Is Consistent with God's Dealings with Israel and Represents a Fulfillment of His Promises (9:1–11:36).* Paul now deals with the major questions that have been simmering beneath the surface of the letter all along. If what he says is true, that God's act of salvation comes equally to Jew and Gentile alike, with no distinction, hasn't God gone back on his promises to Israel (9:6)? On the contrary, for Paul, God's decision to save Gentiles and Jews by faith is a fulfillment of his promises and is consistent with how he has always worked, as is evident from the Jewish Scriptures themselves. God has always chosen people not on the basis of their actions ("works") but on the basis of his own will (9:6–18). Indeed, the Jewish prophets indicate that God shows mercy on whom he chooses and that he had planned from ages past to



SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 21.5 Other Models of Salvation in Paul

In addition to the judicial and participationist models, Paul has other ways of conceptualizing God's act of salvation in Christ, even though he rarely explains how the analogies work in detail. Consider, for instance, the following:

- Sometimes Paul likens salvation to a reconciliation in which two people have had a falling out. A mediator (Christ), at a sacrifice to himself, intervenes and restores their relationship (e.g., see Rom 5:10 and 2 Cor 5:18–20).
- Paul often describes salvation as a redemption, in which a person's life is "purchased" by God through the price of Christ's blood, much as a slave might be purchased by gold (Rom 3:24; 8:23). Never does he explain, however, from whom or what the person is being purchased (the cosmic forces? the devil? sin?).
- Paul sometimes portrays Christ's death as a sacrifice that, like the sacrifices of animals in the Jewish Temple, was designed to bring atonement with God. This view embodies the ancient view that the blood of a sacrifice "covers over" the sins of the people: the technical term for this act of covering is "expiation" (Rom 3:25).
- At other times Paul compares salvation to a rescue from physical danger, in which a person is confronted with peril and certain death only to be saved by someone who heroically intervenes at the cost of his own life (see Rom 5:7–8).

These models are not at mutually exclusive; sometimes Paul applies several of them even within the same passage. Consider for yourself the theologically packed statement of Rom 3:21–26, where Paul uses the judicial, participationist, redemptive, and sacrificial models at one and the same time!

make a people who were not his own (the Gentiles) into his own, whereas many of the Jews would be rejected (9:19–29). The failing lies not in God but in the Jews who have not accepted Christ, for they have mistakenly supposed that God gave them the Law as a means for attaining a right standing before him, whereas the Law itself points to Christ (9:30–10:4). A right standing before God therefore comes exclusively through faith in Christ, and many of the Jews have been faithless (10:5–21). God himself, however, is faithful. He has remained true to his promises to the Jews, saving a remnant of them and using the salvation of the Gentiles to bring about his ultimate purpose, the salvation of all of Israel. Gentiles who have been added to the people of

God must not therefore vaunt themselves against Jews; Israel is still the people of God's special calling, and he will once again bring them all to faith (11:1–36).

- *The Law-Free Gospel Does Not Lead to Lawless Behavior (12:1–15:13).* Those who believe in Christ give themselves to others in self-sacrificing love. Indeed, this is the new cultic act of worship that fulfills the old cultic acts of sacrifice (12:1–21). Believers in Christ are to be obedient to civil authorities (13:1–7), to follow the core of the Torah by loving others as themselves (13:8–10), to lead moral, upright lives in view of their coming salvation (13:11–14), and to refrain from passing judgment or doing things that offend others

(14:1–15:6). Paul's law-free gospel, in other words, will not lead to lawless activities.

- *Close of the Letter* (15:14–16:27). Paul indicates his reasons for writing (15:14–21), discusses his travel plans (15:22–33), and sends greetings to a large number of persons in the congregation (16:1–27). Indeed, he greets so many people by name (twenty-eight altogether) that some scholars have questioned whether this final chapter originally belonged to the letter, since it was written to a congregation Paul had never visited. If the chapter is original to the book, it indicates that a number of people whom Paul had come to know in other contexts had moved to Rome or were known to be visiting there.

CONCLUSION: PAUL AND THE ROMANS

We do not know for certain whether Paul's plans to visit the congregation en route to Spain ever came to fruition. According to the book of Acts, Paul was arrested in Jerusalem before he could make the trip and was then, almost coincidentally, sent to Rome to stand trial before the Roman

emperor for his alleged crimes (Acts 21–28). The author of Acts does not seem to know of any contact between Paul and the Christians living in Rome prior to his arrival; indeed, as customarily happens everywhere Paul goes in Acts, he ends up spending his days not with Christian believers but with recalcitrant Jewish leaders and, evidently, with anyone else who would come to hear him preach while under house arrest (Acts 28:16–31). There are later traditions that indicate that Paul was eventually martyred in Rome; a member of the Roman church, writing sometime around 95 C.E., mentions Paul's death during the tyrannical persecution of the Christians during the reign of Nero (ca. 64 C.E.). This writing, traditionally attributed to the bishop of Rome, Clement, may indeed preserve a historical recollection (see Chapter 27).

Even though we cannot gauge whether Paul succeeded in his Western mission or, indeed, whether he ever gained a following among the Christians in Rome, we can say for certain that he succeeded in one respect. Romans is the most closely reasoned letter that survives from his pen, one that continues to intrigue scholars and to inspire believers. It lays out in the clearest terms he could muster important aspects of Paul's gospel, namely God's power that brings salvation for both Jew and Gentile.

AT A GLANCE

Box 21.6 Romans

1. Unlike Paul's other surviving letters, Romans was written to a church he had not founded or even visited.
2. It was written evidently to secure the support of the Roman Christians for Paul's missionary endeavors further west, in Spain.
3. To receive their support, Paul had to correct some misperceptions about his gospel message. Thus he uses the letter to the Romans to explain his understanding of the gospel as God's act of salvation in Christ, for both Jew and Gentile, with no distinction.
4. A good portion of the letter deals with the implications of this gospel for understanding God's ongoing relationship with his chosen people Israel and the role of the Jewish Law, if in fact it does not contribute to salvation.
5. Paul has a variety of ways of conceptualizing his gospel message (these are best seen as complementary rather than contradictory), including
 - a. A judicial model that expresses the act of salvation in legal terms.
 - b. A participationist model that expresses the act of salvation in terms of union with Christ.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

See also the suggestions at the end of Chapter 18.

Gaston, Lloyd. *Paul and the Torah*. Vancouver, B.C.: University of British Columbia Press, 1987. A collection of significant essays by a leading proponent of the view that Paul's gospel of justification by faith in Christ apart from the works of the Law did not apply to Jews; for more advanced students.

Donfried, Karl P., ed. *The Romans Debate*. 2d ed. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991. A collection of significant essays by eminent New Testament scholars, who discuss (and disagree over) the occasion and purpose of Paul's letter to the Romans.

Wedderburn, A. J. M. *The Reasons for Romans*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988. The most complete book-length discussion of the reasons that Paul wrote his letter to the Romans: it was to explain his law-free gospel to the predominantly Gentile Roman community in light of the tensions between Jews and Gentiles there and in view of his own imminent journey to Jerusalem.

Gager, John G. *Reinventing Paul*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. An interesting and engaging study of Paul, which argues that Paul envisioned one way of salvation for Gentiles and another for Jews.