



CATHOLIC SCRIPTURE STUDY

Catholic Scripture Study Notes written by Sister Marie Therese, are provided for the personal use of students during their active participation and must not be loaned or given to others.

SERIES V

WISDOM LITERATURE AND NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS

Lesson 15 Commentary Romans 1 - 5
Lesson 16 Questions Romans 6 - 8

PAUL AND THE HEART OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE Romans 1:1 - 5:21

INTRODUCTION

The letter to the Romans is placed first in the Letters of Paul because it is the longest, but it is first in another way: it teaches the whole people of God, both Jews and Gentiles, the real source of salvation—faith in the LORD Jesus. This most solemn of the letters echoes the primitive kerygma—the Good News of Jesus; Paul adds his own divine call near Damascus, and his role of Apostle to the Gentiles.

In Rome, there seems to have been quite a Christian group among the Jews there, probably evangelized by Jerusalem Jews. When Paul planned to go to Spain to teach the Gospel, he decided to make Rome his headquarters, sending this letter ahead. In it, he teaches Christ as a royal elder son from David's line, set up as a Son of God with power, the victor over death. Paul presents the Holy Spirit as the dynamic source of holiness to verify and renew mankind. As an apostle, he has a distinction that he values; he was given his role as an apostle by the Risen Christ.

In this letter Paul discussed the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. He sent this letter ahead to prepare the Christians there for his teaching of the New Covenant of Jesus as the source of salvation and one who might be returning soon for the judgment of the world. Paul saw an urgency for the conversion of the whole of humanity, so he pleads for the Jewish Christians of Rome to hold fast to their faith and to resist the pressure on them to adopt a plan of salvation through the Mosaic Law. He asks for them to protect Christian freedom from exaggeration that would believe no law at all bound them.

The letter may have been Paul's only real contact with the Romans with whom he wished to share the meaning of Christianity. Some scholars believe that Paul had two Roman captivities, others that his martyrdom was in 60 A.D. after two years of prison in Rome. In that case, Paul got to Rome as a prisoner after a trial in Caesarea brought on by the Jerusalem Jews who presented a case against Paul to have him put to death. The Roman governor hesitated to do that, and allowed Paul to appeal to the emperor in Rome, since he was a Roman citizen and had such a privilege.

There Paul was to die, a martyr like his master, and like Stephen whose martyrdom he had witnessed with approval. After that event, Christ had met him on the road out of Jerusalem, going to persecute others. In a vision, Christ called this angry outraged Jewish Rabbi Zealot to be an apostle of his. The Risen Christ has immense power to change us.

I. PAUL'S INTRODUCTION TO HIS LETTER (Romans 1:1-17)

A. Greeting (Romans 1:1-7). Paul is writing this letter to Christians whom he had not met. Carefully, he introduces himself as a “servant of Christ,” and immediately adds the reason he is interested in them: “Called to be an Apostle and set apart to proclaim the gospel of God” (Romans 1:1).

This Roman citizen, a Jew, had studied the Scriptures and the Law as a Pharisee. He knew the promises of the prophets in “the Holy Scriptures” (verse 2). He now declares Jesus as the Messiah long awaited, the one “descended from David according to the flesh, but made Son of God in power, according to the spirit of holiness, by His resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our LORD (Romans 1:4).

It is interesting to see the intensity of Saul turned Paul when he names Jesus. First he adds “CHRIST” (the Anointed One in Greek). By the next addition, LORD, a most significant word, Paul puts an extra meaning, for LORD is an Old Testament word for God (Exodus 20:2a). Paul had declared in the letter to the Corinthians that his own teaching is from “NOT I, but the LORD” (1 Corinthians 7:10). To Paul, the Risen Jesus is the exalted LORD. It was by this LORD that Paul was “favored with apostleship” (Romans 1:5).

B. Message to the Romans (Romans 1:8-17). His identity established, Paul turns to greet the Romans, beginning with the thanks he gives God for their faith, “heralded throughout the

world” (Romans 1:8), and the mention he “constantly makes of them in his prayer” (Romans 1:9). He acknowledges that he knows them as Christians already when he writes, “may we be mutually encouraged by our common faith” (Romans 1:12). “The Gospel,” he says, “reveals the justice of God which begins and ends with faith” (Romans 1:17).

After introducing himself, Paul introduces Christ: “a descendent from David the King, but made Son of God in power and the spirit of holiness.” He had called Paul to spread His name and “bring all the Gentiles to obedient faith” (Romans 1:3-5). Faith is a prominent word in this letter: “obedient faith,” “Your faith is heralded,” “our common faith.”

II. HUMANITY WITHOUT CHRIST (Romans 1:18 - 3:19)

A. The Earliest Times. Every early civilization has been found to worship a “higher being” who controlled their world and whom they must please for favor. “Higher being” was not true in many cases, for, as one example, an excellent painting of a giant grasshopper (on an entire wall) in one of the earliest levels of a pyramid outside Mexico City, appears to have been worshipped and placated in some way, “because of its power over their crops,” explained the guide.

Still later times such as that of Greece, then Rome, believed that the gods were like themselves but with higher creative and ruling powers.

It seems, that of all the ages, our time has been the only one to produce a “no-god” belief: atheism - “There is no god” (Theos is God in Greek; “a” negates the following noun). Today many Americans are atheists, as well as others around the world; others live as though there is no “god” to be accounted to. This may, in God’s judgment, mean the most serious blasphemy of all. Now let us see the worship of a god which was “false.” This is called “idolatry.”

B. Idolatry: Paul's Times. Paul calls such worship an utter falsehood; the very creation around us, he points out, shows the invisible reality of the great power and divinity of a Superior Being. The pagans' representation of the immortal God as birds, beasts, snakes, or a man, led God to abandon them to their "disgraceful passions." In all Christian history, there has never been, until our times, the open support of one sin of passion that Paul here describes: Homosexuality. "Both men and women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural... Men did shameful things with men... so God delivered them up to their depraved sense. They became filled with every kind of wickedness—greed, ill will, envy, murder, deceit. All who do such things deserve death" (Romans 1:18-32). Our America fits Paul's description to our shame.

Then Paul turns to God's first effort to call mankind back to Him.

C. Mosaic Law (Romans 2:17-29). In this letter to the Roman Christians, Jew or Gentile, Paul points out the difference between those who knew Mosaic Law and those who kept it by instinct and showed that the demands of the law are written in their hearts (Romans 2:14-15). An outward sign of circumcision, of observance of the Law, he declares, is not enough. "True circumcision is of the heart; such a one receives his praise, not from men, but from God" (Romans 2:29-30). It is the same God who justifies the circumcised and the uncircumcised on the basis of faith. Paul here makes a completely new conclusion: not the Law, not human goodness or heroism, but by the power of faith, are we saved.

III. TRUE SALVATION; FAITH IN CHRIST (Romans 3:21-5:21)

A. The Gift of God. Paul teaches that true justification before God works through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. In fact, all are undeservedly justified by the gift of God in the

redemption brought by Christ Jesus. None of us could ever be capable of an act so loving, so unselfish as to give those untrue to us our own son offered in death for such people. This is what the father did for us and did to Jesus: "Through his blood God made him the means of expiation for all who believe" (Romans 3:25). It was God's own holiness, His great power of love, (for He is Love), that made Jesus the means of expiation for us. In doing so, He not only showed His own goodness in forgiving the past, but he showed His goodness in the present by forbearance: He justified all—all who wished it—so that all who believe in Jesus are made just, holy, worthy of being in God's presence. Here, Paul concludes that this law of faith is apart from observance of the Law (Romans 3:21-22).

B. Abraham and His Faith (Romans 4:1-25, Galatians 3:6-18). If we know the story of Abraham, we can see that he had done no great deeds as ground for the gift given him. When God spoke to him first with a command to leave and go to a "land that I will show you," he followed this by an unusual promise: "Between you and me I will establish my covenant; You are to become the father of a host of nations" (Genesis 17:1-3). "Abram went as the Lord directed him" (Genesis 4:12). According to nature, God's words were unbelievable, impossible, as we may think sometimes, and find it too hard to believe. What kind of faith is Abram's? Do we have that kind of faith? When we think about it, the whole Bible is the result of one man's obedient, trusting faith. In the New Testament, so was Mary's.

C. Faith in Someone. Perhaps the meaning of faith for us has been knowing and accepting the teachings of the Church: believing doctrines.

This is not Abraham's faith here. He believed in God's power to do what he said and in his will to do it. So, he didn't just believe in God—that he exists—but he believed God's word. That is why we should study His words. He speaks to us in our lives.

Questions such as we often have in a case like this, Abram overcame. Can we imagine ourselves in Abraham's situation? What would our doubts be? What would our educated, well-informed minds say? Would we disbelieve when we remember our unworthiness? It will be a good training for faith if we, as we go through this wonderful record that is our Bible, of God's dealings with all sorts of people—we can learn what faith is, and how God hopefully expects and loves it. Especially, we should do this with the New Testament. We should do it this year, and learn from St. Paul.

D. The Result of Abraham's Faith (Genesis 15:6). When the Lord saw Abraham's faith he "credited it to him as an act of righteousness" (Genesis 15:6b). This is what Paul is concerned with in teaching the Romans and new Christians. "Credited" means God "wrote it down as paid for" waiting for us to claim it." "Credited to him as justice." Here "justice" means "paid off," "erased" in the sense of a debt. In the sense of our state of soul, it means guiltless, innocent, even pleasing to God, having a beginning relationship of spiritual union with Him.

Paul's great point that he makes next is that God gave "justice" to Abraham before circumcision; thus, Abraham "is the father of all the uncircumcised who believe as well as the circumcised who believe. As Paul writes on about this wonderful realization, he gives us one of those clear, simple statements full of wisdom for our lives: "All depends on faith, everything is grace" (Romans 4:16). St. Thérèse of Liseux put this in her life so deeply that she believed that all that she had desired to do for God in her life he would allow her to do after her early death from tuberculosis. And her confidence, her faith, was rewarded after her death. A "shower of roses," as she called her miracles, followed all over the world—an avalanche of healings, of conversions. She was canonized quickly after that—a young cloistered nun of 24 years. There are always miraculous things in

God. This wise young woman who died just at the dawn of this century, believed in God's goodness. It is hard for God to resist trust.

Paul writes on: "Thus the promise holds true for all Abraham's descendants, not only for those who have the law, but for all who have his faith." He is father of all, which is why Scripture says, "I have made you father of many nations" (Romans 4:16-17, Genesis 17:50).

As if we had not been convinced of Paul's teaching, perhaps as some of the Romans, Paul adds: "The words, 'it was credited to him as justice' were not written with Abraham alone in view; they were intended for us also" (Romans 4:23-24a).

Abraham's faith, his belief that God could be trusted to do just what he said, is what we all want, especially as we come before God at our death. The remarkable thing about baptism is that we receive far more than the "justice" God gave Abraham—we receive a share of the Divine Life, a union with God that instills in us the ability to believe in Him (faith), to hope that never doubts, to love that will grow. Each act that we do that is good develops that grace; if sinful, it hinders or damages it in some way. We call the gift "sanctifying grace"—literally: "a making holy" gift; this is necessary in us at our death and in our eternal life. Different souls will have different states of this development, from saints to death-bed conversions. It is up to our free will in life.

IV. LIVING IN FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE (Romans 5:1-5)

"Now that we have been justified by faith, we are at peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). In our churches on a Sunday, most of the worshippers were likely given the grace of faith, the ability to believe in God and the mysteries of our faith, at our early baptisms. There are some there who came by this faith with difficulty, who had not this baptized grace early in

life. One story of this is that of Fulton Ousler, reportedly the founder of Readers' Digest. His daughter had become a Catholic—if my memory is not doing me tricks, she was April Ousler; and Mr. Ousler saw the great difference in her that the faith had brought—she glowed with peace and joy. This strong unbeliever that was her father began to wish that he could believe. He tried and tried, all to no avail. One day, he was passing by St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, and at the spur of the moment, went in and knelt down for the first time. In his misery, he wept and begged God to give him faith. In those few moments, the light of faith poured in, and in peace, he joyfully went to ask for Baptism. It seems that he not only had the great peace, but his faith knew the doc-

trines of the faith. There are many such stories from all walks of life in Christianity.

As Paul writes on, he says, “we boast of our hope for the glory of God” and not only that, but “we even boast of our afflictions!” Why? Most of us don't! “Afflictions makes for endurance, and endurance for tested virtue, which leads to hope.” Then we have this wonderful expression of the result of faith: “And this hope will not leave us disappointed, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us” (Romans 5:5). Endurance under affliction assures us, guarantees us, results in us, as a certainty of God's love poured out in us one day, one eternal day.

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