

A
Simple Guide
to
Paul's
Epistles

JEFF SCOGGINS

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Also by Jeff Scoggins:
*You Can Understand the Book of Revelation: A Clear Guide to
Interpreting Prophecy*

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To my wife
for all she makes possible.

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Most of all, my gratitude goes to our Lord, who has revealed his character of love so constantly in his word that it often leaves me speechless.

Abbreviations

AMP: Amplified Bible

BDAG: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*

ESV: English Standard Version

KJV: King James Version

NET: New English Translation

NIV: New International Version (1984)

NKJV: New King James Version

NRSV: New Revised Standard Version

YLT: Young's Literal Translation

Preface

Do the writings of the Apostle Paul ever leave you scratching your head? You're not alone. The Apostle Peter wrote in 2 Peter 3:15-16 that some of Paul's writings are difficult to understand and are, therefore, sometimes distorted and abused. As a pastor I have definitely encountered readers who use Paul's writings to promote ideas that have no support in the rest of the Bible.

In order to understand Paul's writings better for myself, I decided to work my way through them verse by verse. This book is the result of that project. I wanted the mental and spiritual exercise of wrestling with the material unaided by other resources, so at first I avoided using commentaries while grappling with difficult passages (later I sometimes used them to confirm my conclusions). Thus you will note that I use few footnotes. I wanted to see where I would end up by working primarily in the immediate context of each verse, then in Paul's writings overall, and then by considering how other parts of Scripture informed particular passages. The downside of not availing myself of current scholarship is that I certainly passed over some important ideas, and you may find faithful Bible scholars with different interpretations. Even so, I tried to deal honestly with the text even when it seemed to run counter to my own biases.

How to Use This Book

Due to the commentary format of this book, you will find that it does not read as smoothly as some books because I followed Paul's writings verse by verse. You will also find that it doesn't really work as a stand-alone daily devotional. The best approach is to use your Bible alongside this book, reading a paragraph or verse in your Bible and then reading the exposition on the passage. You need your Bible to make sense of the comments.

My hope is that this book will be more than just a reference that tells you what a specific passage might mean. I remember when my father gave me a copy of Oswald Chamber's book *My Utmost for His Highest*. It is arranged as a daily devotional, and I tried to read it that way. I read the verse, or snippet of a verse, at the top of each page, and then I read the thoughts below. More often than not I wondered, *How did he get that out of the verse?*

A Simple Guide to Paul's Epistles

I soon set the book aside. But then a respected pastor mentioned that he used the book in his daily devotions, which made me pull it off the shelf again to see what I was missing.

I discovered that I was missing the Bible itself. When I read the entire Bible passage, then I could, with some effort, begin to see how Chambers had reached his conclusions. My personal Bible study deepened significantly.

I'm no Oswald Chambers, but my hope is that this devotional tool will also drive you deeper into your Bible. Ultimately it is not this book that can change lives, but God's Word.

Romans

Romans 1

Introduction

⁽¹⁾ Paul, in the tradition of great men of the Old Testament, like Moses, David, Isaiah, and so on, considered himself to be a purchased slave of the sort that sold themselves into servitude. He had been purchased by Christ Jesus. Paul was an apostle, called by God to the work of evangelism, of preaching the gospel.

⁽²⁾ This gospel of the good news of Jesus Christ who came to earth, lived among us, died to forgive us, and rose again to mediate for us, had been promised in the holy Scriptures long before the event happened. ⁽³⁾ These Scriptures spoke of the Son of God who would be born as a descendant of David. God would become flesh.

⁽⁴⁾ Some connect the spirit of holiness with the Holy Spirit, but *pneuma hagiosunes* is never translated that way elsewhere in the Bible. It seems preferable to understand that this spirit of holiness was Jesus' nature. It is part of the reason that Jesus could be resurrected after dying the second death. He bore the sins of the world and therefore died cursed, but because he lived his life on earth in a spirit of holiness and in and of himself did not deserve to die, he was raised to life again even after dying the second death.

The idea of power in this verse can be understood in two ways. First, that Jesus was appointed by God's power as the Son of God or, second, that Jesus was appointed the Son of God possessing power. Grammatically either way works, and neither concept would do anything to indicate that Jesus was less than fully God.

Jesus' resurrection from the dead is the proof Paul presents for his right to be our Savior, Christ the Messiah, our Lord, the king of our lives. ⁽⁵⁾ This resurrected Lord is the one who gives grace, which is necessary for our justification and sanctification. Also, through that same grace, he gives authority to his apostles to call people to obedience to the law of God. This obedience comes through faith in God and not through our own efforts, as the author will make abundantly clear throughout the rest of the book of Romans.

Jesus has called his apostles to preach obedience through faith to everyone in the world, including the Gentiles. This is not only for our sakes but also for the sake of God's name, which is synonymous with his character. Here we see a strong indication that God is not operating in this way only for the salvation of sinful humanity. God is also in the process of vindicat-

ing himself before the entire universe. Otherwise, created beings on other worlds (see comments on Hebrews 11:3) would serve him out of fear rather than love, and Satan's questions concerning God's character would continue to live on.

⁽⁶⁾ Paul wrote this letter to the Gentile Christians living in Rome, who were among those called to Jesus Christ or called of Jesus Christ. ⁽⁷⁾ They were loved by God. God loves all men, but those loyal to God have had the wall of separation between them removed. So now they are called holy ones. Most translations say, "called to be saints," which does not fit the dative grammar. Paul was describing their present condition. They had not been called to become holy sometime in the future but rather they had been called holy already. The temple vessels illustrate this concept. These vessels became holy at the moment they were purified and inducted into temple service because they were set apart for a sacred purpose. However, even a holy temple vessel could get dented or tarnished. Still, it was holy. The same goes for a saint. The difference between a saint and a non-saint is that a saint has been set apart as holy and he lives his life for God. He strives always to live as God would have him live, even when he does so imperfectly.

In Paul's day, possibly because of Paul to a great degree, the term *grace* (*charis*) took on a particularly Christian meaning. The term carries connotations of goodwill, kindness, graciousness, etc. However, thanks to the way that Christians came to use it, the term has also come to indicate the redeeming love of God. The same is true with the word *peace*. In Christian usage it became an indication of the peace of God gained through salvation. See more on *grace* and *peace* in comments on 1 Corinthians 1:3.

Paul's Love for the Roman Christians

⁽⁸⁾ Paul thanked God through Jesus for the Roman Christians because their faith was being reported throughout the Roman Empire, which was, for all practical purposes, the entire world in Paul's day. ⁽⁹⁾ Paul could not prove his devotion to the Roman Christians. Only God could verify his claim that he cared enough about them to pray unceasingly for them, and perhaps, depending on how one chooses to punctuate the sentences between verses 9-10, he could be praying for the opportunity to come and visit them. At the time, though, Paul was heading in the opposite direction, returning to Jerusalem. ⁽¹⁰⁾ His request of God appears to be that God would make it possible for him to finally travel to Rome to see them. ⁽¹¹⁾ His reason for so greatly desiring to visit the Roman Christians was so that he

would be able to strengthen and establish them in the faith of Jesus Christ.

⁽¹²⁾ Paul also recognized, though, that no one strengthens another person spiritually without himself being strengthened at the same time. So their interaction together would be mutually beneficial to their spiritual lives.

⁽¹³⁾ Paul wanted to be sure that the Roman Christians understood that he actually desired to come visit them. Perhaps there was some question as to whether he actually wanted this. He assured them that not only did he desire to see them but that he had actually planned to visit them and had been prevented. This may be a divine passive statement indicating that the one preventing him had been the Holy Spirit. The reason that Paul wanted to visit the Roman Christians was so that he could obtain some fruit. In other words, the seeds of Christianity had been planted in Rome and he desired to come preach there as well in order to reap a harvest of converts from the Gentiles.

Paul's Drive to Spread the Gospel

⁽¹⁴⁾ Because of his calling by God Paul felt a deep obligation to proclaim the gospel to everyone, no matter if they were Greeks or barbarians, which was the common Greek way of dividing society. Anyone who was not a Greek was a foreign barbarian. Paul felt an obligation to both, as well as to the wise and foolish. This was another Greek dividing line within society. Greeks prided themselves in their wisdom and considered the ignorant to be second-class. Paul did not care. He wanted to reach both with the gospel of Jesus Christ. ⁽¹⁵⁾ So he did not want the Roman Christians to think that he held some sort of prejudice against them. He cared as much for them as for others. ⁽¹⁶⁾ He wanted to come preach to those in Rome because he knew he had something of substance to share. He was not ashamed of the gospel, as many were. True, Jesus had lived a humble life of servitude and died the lowest, most degrading death possible when he was crucified. Most would consider it a great humiliation to be identified with such a man. Not Paul. In Jesus' life and death Paul recognized the basis of the government of God, which is grounded in love, service, and humility. This gospel message, so embarrassing to some, is the power of God, which brings salvation to fallen, condemned people who are willing to believe and trust God in his salvation. Neither was Paul ashamed to bear this gospel, even though he was despised for it and considered an apostate from Judaism.

This gospel message came first to the Jewish nation as God's specially chosen people; but God's plan was not limited to the Jews. It never had

been. His plan was for salvation to be extended to everyone in the world. The Jews came first in privilege, but that meant they also came first in responsibility and judgment. For this reason Paul, when preaching in a new place, always went first to the Jews.

⁽¹⁷⁾ In this gospel message the *dikaiosune* of God is revealed. This word is sometimes translated as *justice* and other times translated as *righteousness*, which we do not, unfortunately, always equate together. The idea that righteousness and justice are not necessarily synonymous terms, however, is a modern construct that can cause some confusion in English translation. We gain some further insight into this word, *dikaiosune*, from its counterpart in the Old Testament, *tsedek*. In the Hebrew mind righteousness was not an abstract concept for an inner quality but something that could be seen in action. So the Hebrews could say, “Remember the righteousneses of Yahweh (*tsidqoth Yahweh*).” By this they referred to his saving actions for them: the exodus, the victory over Sissera, etc. So now a *tsedek of Yahweh* has been revealed apart from the Old Testament writings. Ultimately God’s righteousness is founded in his justice. In other words, his righteousness is not random acts of goodness but calculated and just acts of goodness. His righteousness (right-doing) and his justice are one and the same.

This righteousness/justice is from faith to faith or perhaps out of faith into faith. There are at least two ways this may be understood. One, our righteousness/justification comes through faith alone. Thus, the NIV renders it “righteousness that is by faith from first to last.” We cannot earn it or deserve it; we receive Christ’s righteousness through faith in him. The second way to understand it, which does not conflict with the first, is that our righteousness/justification comes to us through our faith and thereby builds our faith. Our faith builds more faith. Thus, the NASB and others translate it “from faith to faith.” This is as it has been written in Habakkuk 2:4, “The righteous/justified will live by faith.”

God’s Dealing with Wickedness

⁽¹⁸⁾ God’s wrath against sin, which is the transgression of his law—godlessness and wickedness of all kinds—is being revealed. It is natural that a loving father would be angry over anything that hurts those he loves. Therefore God’s anger is directed against those who keep others from following the truth revealed by God through his creation and through Jesus Christ.

⁽¹⁹⁾ God has not only made it possible, but he has made it easy to live in relationship with him, by giving us all we need to know. ⁽²⁰⁾ He has revealed

himself to us through his creation. We can see his power and his divine nature through his creative power. When it comes down to the final judgment we will have no excuse for not being drawn into relationship with God. He has given us more than sufficient evidence of his love for us.

⁽²¹⁾ In spite of having every reason to know God from his creative acts, and, indeed, in spite of actually knowing him, many continue to refuse to glorify or credit God with what he has done. Because of this their minds have become shallow and futile. That is what happens to minds that do not acknowledge God; they became darkened and ignorant, spiritually speaking. ⁽²²⁾ They have an appearance of wisdom, but in reality—spiritual reality—they actually become foolish. ⁽²³⁾ They have traded the eternal and incorruptible God and all that goes along with him for other gods, including carvings and birds and animals, even the creeping crawly ones. We could also add materialism to this list for possessions can become idols as well. In the end, to know God and yet to ignore him is the most foolish choice a person can make because he is giving up the only possibility he has for life beyond the present moment, and also he is giving up life of any consequence immediately. Such a person is the walking dead.

⁽²⁴⁾ Because such people have chosen to live in ignorance of God, God gave them their desire. He allowed them to plunge into their own lusts and impurity of heart. He allowed their thoughts to become reality so that their physical bodies would face the consequences. ⁽²⁵⁾ Foolishly, they jumped at the opportunity. They traded the truth of God for the lie of Satan. They began to worship the creature (themselves) and ignored the Creator. ⁽²⁶⁾ Therefore God released them to their degrading passions. Even women, who seem to be normally less inclined toward such things, traded natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. ⁽²⁷⁾ Also men gave up sexual relations with women and became inflamed with lust for other men. In participating in this lewd sexual activity with other men they received in themselves the consequences. Unnatural sexual activity is followed, eventually, by unpleasant physical, mental, and spiritual manifestations. No one participates in such activity without dire consequences. ⁽²⁸⁾ Those who desired to be released to their own passions did not consider it worth even exploring the knowledge of God. They did not want to know truth so they refused even to look into it to see if it was truth. So, God gave them over to their desires. He allowed them to do whatever worthless, disreputable, unlawful activities they could think of to do.

⁽²⁹⁾ And he did this to “fulfill all unrighteousness.” Jesus used these

words in their opposite form to John at his baptism. “. . . it is fitting for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Whichever path we walk we are either fulfilling righteousness or unrighteousness. There is no third option. To fulfill unrighteousness is to live in wickedness, which includes greediness, evil, envy, murder, strife, meanness, and gossip. Therefore to fulfill righteousness means not only avoiding unrighteous acts but doing their opposite: generosity, good, compassion, healing, unity, kindness, edification.⁽³⁰⁾ To fulfill all unrighteousness is to slander others, hate God, be disrespectful, to be arrogant, to boast, to invent ways of doing evil, and to be disobedient to parents. To fulfill all righteousness, then, would mean the opposite: avoiding slandering others, loving God, respecting everyone, being humble, inventing ways of doing good deeds, and obeying parents.

⁽³¹⁾ The marks of those who fulfill all unrighteousness are unintelligence in the wisdom of God’s order, unfaithfulness to anyone but themselves, dwelling in their thoughts on idols of anything that is not God, and being uncaring about the suffering of others. On the other hand, the marks of those who are fulfilling all righteousness are intelligence in the wisdom of God’s order, faithfulness in all we do or say to anyone, affections that are directed toward God before anything else, and compassion for others.

⁽³²⁾ Those involved in ongoing wickedness not only know God (implying full knowledge), but also know that disobedience to God’s commands makes them worthy only of death. They know this but still they practice evil themselves and not only that, they also approve with pleasure when others do the same things. This is an active consent to do evil, not just passive. Not only is this knowledge of the commands of God and consequences of evil available to us in God’s word but also through our conscience. Compare Romans 2:14-16.

Romans 2

Warning Against Judging

⁽¹⁾ Perhaps the word *however* would make Paul’s meaning even more clear than the word *therefore*. Paul appears to be making the point that the Roman Christians and Jews needed to listen, even though he was speaking to the Gentiles, because they were involved in the same wickedness discussed at the end of the last chapter. It is true that many people have given their lives over to living in rebellion against God in sinful, debased acts of