

# Romans 1

by John Nelson Darby

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*The epistle to the Romans presents the relationship between God and man, and the gospel of God, which is the activity of God's love going out into a world of men through Christ.*

**Scripture:** Romans 1:16

**Topics:** "Grace", "Justification"

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## Description

John Nelson Darby explores the Epistle to the Romans, emphasizing its purpose in revealing God's righteousness and the relationship between man and God. He contrasts the focus of Paul's epistles on justification and the relationship of the redeemed with the divine life presented in John's writings. Darby highlights four key truths in the New Testament, particularly the manifestation of divine life, the fulfillment of promises to the Jews, mercy to the Gentiles, and the believer's identity as sons of God. He underscores the importance of understanding man's sinful nature and God's grace, culminating in the gospel of God that offers salvation through Christ. The sermon serves as a foundation for understanding the relationship between God and humanity, emphasizing the necessity of faith in receiving God's righteousness.

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## Transcript

I take up this epistle to the Romans, not with intention of entering into every detail, but to trace the general idea of the purpose of the Spirit of God in it, and the course of the apostle's reasoning. We have before noticed the distinction between the epistles of Paul and those of John. The main subject of John's epistles being the character of the divine life which was with the Father, manifested in the Son, and communicated to us through the Spirit - so that the divine nature in us should be able to realise the affections of the child of God; of Paul's, the presenting of man to God. Thus the general scope of John's epistles is, first, the manifestation of the divine life; second, the communication of it; while Paul's epistles have another character altogether - insisting on justification, and revealing the counsels and ways of God, and the consequent relationship in which the redeemed are put before Him.

The great subject of the New Testament, besides the blessed person of the Lord and the revelation of God in Him, is the manifestation and communication of the divine life, the making us partakers of the divine nature, and the bringing man to God according to His righteousness and counsels in Christ. The child derives his life from his father, and there results not merely likeness of character but a peculiar relationship.

I would just advert here to the four truths prominent in the New Testament:

first, the manifestation and communication of life;

second, the accomplishment in Christ of all the promises given from Adam downwards, presented in Christ to the Jews, His people;

third, mercy to the Gentiles (as in Romans 15:8, 9, Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made to the fathers, and that the Gentiles should glorify God for His mercy);

fourth, our place as sons, and the church as united to Christ, its Head.

The first is especially in John's epistles - the manifestation, then the communication, of the divine life.

The second and third are found in Romans, with the groundwork of our place as sons, and only a glance in the second part at the fourth, which is fully brought out in Ephesians. The character of this is only hinted at practically, not taught, in Romans.

The fourth point of truth, which is revealed in the epistle to the Ephesians, is distinct from the promises to the Jews and the mercy to the Gentiles, being a new thing, though connected with the latter. The seeing these distinctions greatly facilitates the understanding of the epistles, and clears up passages, otherwise obscure.

20 In Romans we have two great subjects brought out: the accomplishment of the promises made to the Jews; and mercy to the Gentiles; and, in so doing this, Paul lays the foundation of all relationship between God and man. The beginning of this first chapter is thus an introduction to all that is afterwards unfolded in the epistle. Remark here, that in the first presentation of the gospel, it is the person, not the work, of Christ which is found in grace, but important as to the claim of subjection to Him, Son of David and Son of God with power. Then, in verse 16, he is not ashamed of the gospel, because the righteousness of God is revealed in it. The epistle to the Romans has this large character naturally enough, as it consists well with the address to the great centre of the world's empire; for Paul was writing to the Romans, whom he had never seen, as the apostle of the Gentiles, and takes his stand on the high ground of being the one to whom God had committed His counsels. So Peter, in addressing the Jews already scattered in the world, presents resurrection as a living hope, and, speaking to them on this new principle of resurrection, says, "as strangers and pilgrims," etc., thus carrying on what was consequent upon it, in reference to those who are to participate in it.

In a great many of the various epistles we see the instructions and exhortations suited to the varied need of those addressed and called out by their state: as, in Corinthians, moral evil is treated of; in Colossians, warning against slipping away from the Head; in Galatians, falling from grace through the adoption of the law, is insisted on; in Thessalonians, the coming of the Lord and the errors into which trouble of mind had thrown them in this respect. But the epistle to the Romans, being addressed to the capital of the world and to those with whose circumstances the apostle was not familiar, takes the wide scope of man's responsibility, Jew and Gentile, and how grace has met it, and lays the sure foundation of the relationship of man to God.

There are two parts in the doctrinal teaching of this epistle. Up to the close of Romans 8 forms the first part; and Romans 9, 10, 11, form the second part; while the concluding chapters are occupied with precepts. In the first part you get Jews and Gentiles reduced to the common condition of sinners; but the

Jew would object, and say, If this be so, that there is no difference between the Jew and the Gentile, how then is God to make good His promises to the Jews? This difficulty is answered in chapters 9-11, the infallibility of the promises of God being shewn in chapter 11. But the common ground, on which both Jews and Gentiles are set, is in perfect salvation in Christ Jesus, and remains in all its force. It is important to remark in this epistle the way in which Paul sets man aside as being proved a sinner, poor, vile, and lost, and that he does this to bring God in. It is not merely that he introduces man as a sinner, but man must be thoroughly put down, in order to bring in God Himself instead of man, that God may act toward man in His own way and according to His own character.

21 We see a striking example of the same way of exhibiting grace in Ephesians 2. After the Jews and Gentiles had been spoken of as alike children of wrath, all is passed over, and God is brought out in His own character as rich in mercy, shewing what He has done, and what He is to such as they are. We can have no settled peace or rest of heart till we are on this ground; nor can we know God so as to trust Him, to rest in Him, and adore Him, till we prove Him thus. Then it is a settled question: our hope and trust are in God, as it is written, "who by him do believe in God." Therefore the apostle does not say we are justified before God, though it be true, but it is God who justifies, that the heart might be brought to rest in God Himself. Paul, though righteous as to legal righteousness, had gone to the extreme extent of what sin really is: it was not a mere looseness of expression when he called himself the chief of sinners, for Paul in heart was the wickedest man that ever trod the earth; not, of course, guilty of immorality (as he says of himself, as touching the righteousness which is of the law he was blameless) "After the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee"; but he was the ardent enemy of Christ, and it was when he reached to the highest point of his wickedness, "being exceedingly mad against them," that at that moment he was "separated unto the gospel of God." He knew what grace was.

I will now rapidly go over, without entering into detail, what man is, and has shewn himself to be. Though cast out of paradise, God had borne with man, but at first left him to himself, though not without a testimony; but the result of leaving man to himself was such corruption and violence, that he must be destroyed from off the face of the earth. God put a close to his abominations by a flood. The promise having been given as a witness that grace was the true source of blessing, the law followed, and it was broken. The prophets came next, and they were rejected, stoned, and slain. And last of all God sent His Son: Him the world killed. It was not merely that man had broken the law, and slain the prophets, but when the goodness of God came, they hated Him revealed in goodness. Well, Jesus prays for His murderers, pleading their ignorance, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"; as in the case of one who owed ten thousand talents, and, forasmuch as he had nothing to pay, his lord forgave him the debt. (And this is what I take to be the meaning of the parable, though it has a general application.) So the Holy Ghost takes up again and carries on this very intercession of our Lord, when forgiveness of sins is preached by Peter at Jerusalem, saying, "And now brethren, I wot, that through ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers . . . repent ye therefore and be converted." And what was the result? Did they repent? No; not only had they killed the Prince of Life, but they now fill up the measure of their iniquity in stoning Stephen, thus rejecting the testimony of the Holy Ghost to the grace and goodness of God in the gospel of Christ glorified, as in His humiliation.

22 At this point it is that Saul of Tarsus comes out, and so mad against the followers of Christ that he was the very apostle of the enmity in the heart of man against the testimony of the Holy Ghost to the grace and goodness of God. But here God meets him in the way, and his mouth is closed as to goodness in man; for while all God's means were used to bring man's heart to return to Himself in blessing, Paul was found in

the most active hostility to Him, being determined to put a stop to this testimony of grace and goodness if he could. Then the Lord appears to him in glory in connection with the church, owning all the saints as Himself, "Why persecutest thou me?" - "for he that is joined to the Lord is one spirit." Thus Paul sets out as being the leader of the active energy of man in opposition to God, that he might be a perfect witness of the grace that overcame him, as he anew sets out on his way testifying that there is grace and forgiveness for one such as he. Everything that could have religiously sustained his heart was broken down when God met him by the way. Take conscience, for instance: outwardly he was blameless, yet thought he ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. How terrible must it have been to Paul to find that his natural conscience, blameless as it was, had left him all wrong, as of no avail! We know that he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink, so terrible was the upsetting of his soul. Then take the law, his boast and glory as divinely given: it had been his ruin before God in self-righteous enmity to Christ. The religious teachers he had looked up to, the priests and Pharisees, and his own zeal, had only brought him into opposition and open rebellion against God. Everything in which his heart had trusted left him a mere sinner, naked in the presence of the glory of God, his enmity only the greater by that trust. Thus ended all means, leaving Paul a "child of wrath," as he says, "even as others."

23 Thereupon Paul starts, not from what he is, but from what God is; he starts as the Lord's servant: "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" He starts as a called apostle, separated unto "the gospel of God." It is not merely the gospel of Christ, but the gospel of God. It is a wonderful expression, as the gospel of God is the activity of God's love going out into a world of men as hopeless and bad as Paul had been; it is now dealing with man, through Christ, on the ground of what God is. The gospel of God is God's own good news in giving His Son to carry this message of mercy and grace to lost man, made effectual in His work.

The Jews accused the Lord of breaking the sabbath, the sabbath being the sign of the covenant between God and His people, and to be kept the seventh day, a rest connected with the first creation. God's rest is at the end of labour. It was founded in Israel on the principle of the law. Man's labour in righteousness gave him rest at the end. But in fact, when divine truth came in, we find in John 5:17 there was no sabbath for Christ in this world. Sin had come in, and there is no rest for God where sin is: "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work." Thus He had come down where sin was, and He was working in the accomplishment of that grace, which gives a better rest to man. Paul comes in here as the servant, or slave, bound to the work: a bondman to Christ, separated unto the gospel of God; that was his business, and if he could further the gospel by making tents, of course he would continue to make them; but he was an apostle called to the gospel of God. And where God gives ministry, it is as the vessels of God's activity in grace, for the calling of sinners and the building up and edification of His saints.

24 It is very important to distinguish between teaching the church, and the testimony of grace to the world. The Old Testament is full of mercy; but even so there could yet be no proclamation of an accomplished work of redemption. But further, that is not the church (nor indeed is the church the doctrinal subject in this epistle). It was what He had promised afore by His prophets in the holy scriptures. The church was not the subject of promise, but the "gospel of God" was: from the beginning it had been said, the seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent's head. The Gentiles had not the promises, though there were special ones to the Jews. The promises of God were made to the second Adam, and not to the first; the promise in Genesis that the serpent's head should be bruised was made to the Seed of the woman, which Adam was not. So it is said: to Abraham were the promises made, and to his seed; and that Seed was Christ. The promises, then, were entirely connected with Christ, who is the Seed in whom all these promises centre. The person of Christ, as we see here, is the great subject of the gospel even before His work,

though we could have no part with Him without His work. This is of all importance, as God is now claiming subjection to His Son. There is not an infidel or a rebel, however great, who shall not bow the knee to Jesus; if in grace, it is salvation: but, if the heart does not bow to the grace, the knee must bow under the judgment.

In verse 3, "concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh," the apostle is bringing out the double character of the Lord. In verse 1 we have the person of the Son as the subject of the gospel; then, secondly, as the seed of David according to the flesh, according to promise. Then Paul brings out definitely the character of the Son, "declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead." Thus we have the Son of God with divine power, though clothed with humiliation. Then, again, we have the Son coming down in the midst of defilement with divine power, passing through it according to the Spirit of holiness. This was shewn through all His life by absolute separation from all defilement. He passed through the whole scene of evil untouched and unsullied by sin, though in contact with it, touching those in it all around, yet separate Himself. He touches the leper, who saw His power, but was uncertain of His goodness: and was He defiled? No! but in touching it He chases away the uncleanness without becoming unclean Himself, and none but the Son of God could do this. But His was perfect grace coming down into the defilement, banishing and dispelling it, without receiving it Himself.

25 But, besides sin and defilement in us, the manifested power of Satan was this - that he had the power of death, and this Satan had on man by the judgment of God Himself; for God had said, "In the day thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die." Thus man was under the power of him who had the power of death, that is, the devil; and if the Son of God is to deliver man from under the power of Satan, He Himself must go down to his stronghold, this last citadel of Satan. He must Himself go down under the power of death, if He could not be holden of it, that He might "deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage"; and He, the Son of God, feared it, as He piously should, as the judgment of God (Heb. 5); but He was heard in that He feared; He bore it as the judgment of God, but He broke all the bars by which Satan held us, and He has set us free. Satan committed himself entirely by putting his hand on the spotless person of the Prince of Life, who bore our sins; and in His rising from the dead, the sins, and Satan's power, were all gone before God and for faith.

The resurrection shews the divine power of the Son of God. When Peter said, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God!" the Lord said, "Upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." That is, all Satan's power over the first man manifested in death shall not prevail against it: for that is the meaning of the gates of hell. Man had been tried by every means - without law, and he was lawless: by the law, but he only brought forth wild grapes: but all this depended on the responsibility of man, not on the power of God. Satan prevailed against man by his lusts, and led him on to the second death. But if it is the Son of the living God who has entered into the conflict, and founded the church on His work and victory, the gates of hell, the power of death, shall not prevail against it.

26 The Spirit of holiness always displayed in life is demonstrated by the resurrection from the dead, and here observe that it is "from amongst," or "from out of," the dead. The twelve believed, as did Martha, in the resurrection of the dead, as there will be a resurrection of all the dead, good and wicked; but they were questioning one with another what the rising from the dead should mean; Mark 9:10. It is the coming in of God's own living divine power, breaking through the bands of death, and taking up those that are God's from amongst the wicked dead. This resurrection, realised in the power of the Spirit, is our present standing, though we still wait for the redemption of the body. The very same power, we learn in

Ephesians, which raised Christ from among the dead, has wrought in us - "quickened us together with Christ."

The Son of God goes down in grace for us to the very place in which we were by sin, and by His own divine power breaks the bands of death, and takes us up from under its power, and places us, according to the efficacy of His own work, in the presence of God. Thus, all that my sin could do has been met by divine power and put away, rendering void of power him that had the power of death, that is, the devil. How marvellous the grace! The consequence is not merely that there ought to be holiness in us, but that there must be holiness in nature, though vigilance be needed to maintain it in practice.

How did Christ rise out of the grave? By His own divine power, as by the glory of the Father, and in the power of the Spirit; and it is the same divine energy which is the spirit of holiness in walk, raising me from the dead now in spirit, that is, the power of the new life in me, and by reason of which even the resurrection of my body will take place. All that He has done is mine, but I enter into it by virtue of a life which is a holy one. It is not merely a duty to be holy, but there is holiness in us, because we are partakers of justification, of the whole efficacy of His work, by means of a life which is essentially holy, for it is Christ's.

This is the gospel of God, that He, in the activity of His own love, in the person of Christ, has come down here, and walked in holiness where sin was, and gone down under the power of death, though He could not be holden of it, that He might deliver us from the power of him who had the power of death. I am now raised spiritually and morally by the very same divine power that will raise up my body. "By whom we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith," etc. All will be called to bow to the revelation of Christ, who was dead and is alive again for evermore.

27 "Called saints," or "saints called," v. 7. It is the same principle here as the apostle called. We are saints called, thus shewing the grace of God, as it is not to us by birth or descent as the Jews, but it is all of grace. So Abraham was called, and chosen, and faithful. If we are called, it is not of the will of man, nor of the will of the flesh, but of the will of God; and we are bound to give thanks, in that "God hath saved us and called us with an holy calling." What a very different thing it is in our souls, for what a different thought we have of God when we believe the activity of God's love! It is not only that "God is love," but that God is active in His love.

"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Alas! we pass over these gracious words very lightly. The apostle felt what he said in the power of the Spirit; favour and peace from the Father and the Son. Mercy is only added when the epistles are addressed to individual saints, but when the saints are looked at as a whole, they are seen as the fruit of mercy shewn; being seen by the eye of God as under the influence and energy of the love and grace that had saved them: but as individual saints they need mercy every moment. The apostle looked at them as under the eye of a Saviour God, and he wished them to have the full manifestation of what was in the God that had saved them. All the effect of there being no cloud between them and God.

God is never called the God of joy, though He gives joy; but constantly the God of peace, and the apostle desires their peace from God should be undisturbed - having perfect peace in Him in the midst of this whirlwind of passion; he desired for them all the effect of the consciousness of their position, all the affections suited to this relationship. If a child feels towards his father as towards a master, he does not know his position; if we have not unlimited confidence, we have not found our place. The saints in filial

love will address God as their Father. In the government of the church it is the Lord Jesus we shall address; this distinction should always be marked. In all our petitions, failures, confessions, and need, we go as individuals to God as our Father; but in everything relating to church conduct, we go to Him who is the Head of the church. If we have not the unlimited confidence in God to go to Him with our very follies even, we do not know Him as "the Father."

28 If Christ said, "It is my meat to do the will of him that sent me," Paul could say, through grace, "whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son." It is not service at all, if it be merely outward; unless we can say, "Of thine own we have given thee." All true service must flow from communion with the source of service; it is no service if we are not drinking in Christ, and conscious that we are doing His will; if I should take up any service, without being confident that God would have me do it, there would be no power in it. Service then, if real, must flow from direct communion with God. We may go on in a course of action as a consequence of communion for a good while. Thus, for instance, we may compare the state of the Thessalonians with that of the church of Ephesus in Revelation. To the Thessalonians it is said by Paul, that he knows their work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope: here we see the three cardinal points - faith, hope, and charity, as springs of work, labour, and patience; but not so in the address of the Lord to Ephesus - it was work, labour, and patience; but there was not the present spiritual power, which comes from God direct, therefore the candlestick was threatened to be removed. How often do our attempts at service flow more from thought of something we may have to do, than from direct communion with God! It then becomes, or is in danger of soon becoming, the mere activity of the flesh, and at any rate is the drudgery of duty without power, instead of serving with the spirit; what a comfort that all my life through I may be serving the Lord with my spirit!

This world is a wilderness, a labyrinth, but God is guiding us through it. When Israel were in the wilderness, was there any path for them? None! "They wandered in the wilderness where there was no way." We read that Moses said to Jethro, "he might be to them instead of eyes." No, says God, I will be as eyes to you; for as Israel departed from the mount a three days' journey, the ark of the covenant of the Lord went before them, to search out a resting-place for them, not merely to bring them at last into the land. Now, the place of the ark was in the midst of the camp, and they were to keep the charge of the Lord; but when Israel journeyed from Sinai, it went before them. Again, God says of Israel, "Though I have scattered them amongst the countries, yet will I be to them a little sanctuary in the countries; Ezek. 11:16. Is God less than this to us? No; He is leading us through this world's labyrinth, where there is no path, no way but Jesus; for He is our only track in this wilderness of sin and sorrow; but what an unspeakable comfort to have such an One! Yet we need perfect dependence that we may discern the perfect path that has in it the track of the Lord's own footsteps: to this end, flesh must be mortified, and the will subdued.

29 "Without ceasing I make mention of you in my prayers." See the apostle's wonderful energy with God, and this is one mark of spiritual power, the capacity of keeping up our interest in all saints everywhere, in our soul, in intercession for all saints in every place; and this leaves us in entire dependence on the will of God, for no real spiritual power ever takes us out of the place of waiting on God: so with Eliezer, he says, "Lord, let the damsel to whom I say, Let down thy pitcher," etc., "be the same thou hast appointed for thy servant Isaac"; and when the woman had given him drink and his camels also, he does not yet say, Oh, here is the answer to my prayer, but he is still waiting on God, and, wondering at her, held his peace, to wit, whether the Lord had made his journey to prosper or not; and when the camels had done drinking, he said, "Whose daughter art thou?" and when he found she answered the description of that which to him was divine direction, as the word is to us, he bowed his head and worshipped the Lord. Success often

takes us out of the place of communion, because it is our success when we do not acknowledge God in it. The faith which waits on God turns to God when the blessing comes, and the joy is much greater.

"I am not ashamed of the gospel; for it is the power of God unto salvation." God coming in, in power - this is the gospel character, it is complete, and it is of God; no mixture. The "wrath of God, moreover, is revealed from heaven"; not merely governmental wrath here on the earth, as bringing Nineveh against Israel, or carrying Judah to Babylon, but wrath from heaven. It is not yet manifested, though it was seen to a certain extent in the deluge; faith sees it in the cross.

30 Now, it is the nature and character of God that is brought out to meet what man is. God now looks upon what man is, in the presence of what He is, in respect to the very perfectness of His nature, and the activity of grace that has brought out what man is. This can only shew man utterly a sinner. Is it claiming righteousness? No; for now man's righteousness is entirely set aside, as the ground of his standing before God. But we have God's righteousness made known, meeting the necessity which the proof of man's utter sinfulness brings before us, not something to grow up to righteousness, but perfect now. It is revealed from faith to faith, it is said, that is, faith is the principle on which it is revealed. God's righteousness, being a perfect and an existing thing, complete in itself, is revealed, and that not on the principle of man's working, but of faith, and so to faith; so that the man, be he who he may, that has faith, gets it. If it were given on the principle of human righteousness, the righteous man would have it, and the law be the rule; if on the principle of benevolence, the poor man would have it; but it is neither. It is on the principle of faith.

I would desire that our hearts might rest on this wonderful truth, the activity of God's love coming down into a world ruined by sin, and under wrath. God Himself is the rest, as He is the guide all the way; His divine favour and unchanging love and goodness accompanying and abiding with us all the journey through. There is no rest but in His own way. The more pains God has taken to set man right, have only proved the more that the tree is bad; the more you dig around a bad tree, the more bad fruit it will produce. It is all God's working and God's righteousness, not of man's working nor man's righteousness, though that working of God will alone produce fruits of righteousness in man.

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