

Part One

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD THROUGH FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST (chapters 1-8)

THE APOSTLE AND HIS COMMISSION (1: 1-7)

¹Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God ²which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, ³the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh ⁴and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, ⁵through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about obedience to the faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, ⁶including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ;

⁷To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

IN ancient times a letter began with the sender's name and greetings. This does the same. But one thing becomes clear at once: this man does not write in a private capacity but as the representative of his Lord. His name disappears beneath that of his principal, and his greeting contains already the great message which he has to deliver. He introduces himself as someone who has and wants nothing for himself. The commission which he has received is his life. He is a messenger and nothing else.

His mission has its basis in the ancient revelation contained in the Scriptures of the Old Testament but whose real content is actually the Son of God, the man Jesus from the tribe of David who, nevertheless, is the Son of God through the Holy Spirit, one with him in essence (Phil. 2: 6). Only through and since the resurrection from the dead, which set him free from the weakness of the flesh, has this sonship manifested itself in power. The Son is the sum and substance of the good News, for the delivery of which he, this Lord, has graciously prepared

and set apart Paul as his servant. It is good news for all. Although it deals with Israel's Messiah promised in the Old Testament, it is also meant for the Gentile nations; for he wants to be known and acknowledged by all as the Lord. Paul introduces himself to the Roman Community as the one who has been commissioned to win all Gentiles for Jesus. They, the Romans and he, although they have never seen one another, are from the very beginning surrounded by the one grace and love of God the Father, revealed in Christ the Lord and communicated through the Holy Spirit.

In this the theme of the whole letter is already indicated. From God's side the lordship of Christ, the revealer of God's love; from man's side the "obedience of faith". Faith is Christ really becoming my Lord, and Christ cannot become my Lord in any other way save by my knowing and my acknowledging him in whom God claims me as his own. This act of becoming Lord is God's programme for humanity and the world, which is not only to be proclaimed by his envoy but also realized by him.

THE PERSONS AND THE SUBJECT-MATTER (I: 8-17)

⁸First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. ⁹For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, ¹⁰asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. ¹¹For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, ¹²that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. ¹³I want you to know, brethren, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. ¹⁴I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish: ¹⁵so I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

¹⁶For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live."

The strictest objective approach is here also completely personal. First of all the apostle is grateful to God for what has happened to the Roman Community. Paul knows nothing of a faith which is so concealed that nothing of it is visible. The whole world speaks of the faith of the Roman brethren, and this calls for gratitude. The Holy Spirit who arms him for prayer and service is the same one who binds him in heart with the Christians in Rome, and so he is longing for personal fellowship with them. Fellowship, however, is mutual exchange. He too, the apostle, wants not only to give but also to receive. The apostle is no prince of the Church who only gives out, but a brother desirous of encouragement from his fellow-brethren. Yet this humble man thinks in continents as he reflects on his task. At the beginning and end of his letter he allows us to have a look at his world-embracing strategy of mission. He is the fisher of men in the grand style. Thus runs his commission from the very start (cp. Acts. 9: 15-16). How could he who, as the first to be entrusted with the mystery that the Gentiles as well as the Jews were destined for the redemption of the Messiah (Eph. 3), pass by Rome, the metropolis of the world!

What Rome meant then is almost beyond our comprehension. We must imagine as one all the capital cities of our own day together, from New York and London to Tokyo. He, the Jewish itinerant preacher, is to conquer Rome for Christ. By what means? By the message of a Galilean who was executed as a criminal! In face of the wisdom and might of Rome, to set up the "foolishness of the Cross", this glorification of the powerless one! But the apostle's thought barely touches upon what might have been so natural, namely, the failing of his courage when confronted by this contrast. There are no inferiority complexes here and no false humility, but an unbroken consciousness of power. "I am not ashamed; for it is the power of God." The Gospel is not only an epoch-making power but a power for salvation; its effect reaches into eternity, just as itself derives from eternity. Thus it is for everyone. God's truth, God's will and God's love know no frontiers; even the greatest oppositions of blood and history which split humanity apart lose all meaning in face of it. There exists only one frontier, only one exclusive condition: faith. "To everyone who has faith." Christ uses force with no one. This Lord can only

become Lord in the free obedience of faith; if there is one thing that cannot be enforced, it is trust.

“The righteousness of God.” Out of the understanding of this phrase, whose meaning had lain buried for several hundred years under an alien human tradition of religion, was born the Reformation. From the moment Luther understood again the meaning of the righteousness of God, he was called to be the Reformer of Christendom. “Then I suddenly felt that I was born again and entered through open doors into paradise”, he wrote. The righteousness of God is not his judicial righteousness but that which he royally bestows; not—as the contrast is presented later—a righteousness from the works of the law, but righteousness by faith. To believe means to receive. Here it concerns the righteousness received and freely granted, the unique righteousness founded on the gift of God. Yet in the same way this faith is also the goal; the divine revelation also leads to faith.

Once more the theme of the letter is indicated in a new form. This concerns God and his will. Wherever his will is realized, there is the righteousness of God. It is nothing else but what in the Gospels is called the “reign of God” or the “Kingdom of God”. But this reign of God is not realized in man’s own activity but solely in the action of God. And yet it concerns the realization of God’s will among mankind, in men’s lives, and thus the action of God whereby man is delivered into the power of God, in which the inmost resistance of man is broken and the decisive obstacle to the dominion of God is therefore removed.

The righteousness of God is realized in faith. He who believes lives by God’s word and action alone; he receives his life from God’s hand as a lease and he lives it as his liegeman.

A. ALL MANKIND’S NEED OF REDEMPTION

(1: 18—3: 20)

GOD’S WRATH AND JUDGMENT ON THE GENTILES (1: 18-32)

¹⁸For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness

suppress the truth. ¹⁹For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; ²¹for although they knew God they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. ²²Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.

Before developing more particularly the contents of Christ's Gospel, the apostle raises the question of who it is who is to receive it. It is the man without God, the godless person. Without the grace of Christ, man is indeed a godless creature in the sense that he opposes God's truth in his actions and thoughts, and is therefore also denying to his fellowman his right. Yet he is not a godless creature in the sense that he gets rid of God in general. Man is always under the power of God, either of his grace or his wrath. God's wrath is the "adverse wind" of the divine will which he comes to feel who runs into it. God also reveals his nearness to the godless creature precisely in his wrath, thereby declaring that he is not mocked.

Thus there is no human existence without a relation to God. The pagan religions testify of this, too. They would not exist if God did not at first and inescapably declare himself to everyone since the dawn of humanity in his works, in nature and history. The denial of such a "general revelation" preceding the historical revelation of grace in Jesus Christ can appeal neither to Paul nor to the Bible at large. It contradicts the fact of responsibility. If man did not know God, how could he be responsible? But he is responsible, for he knows about God on the strength of the divine self-revelation. The apostle does not speak of a past, now buried, possibility but of something actually present; for it is true of everyone that he is inexcusable in his godlessness. It is true of every godless man that he does not give the honour to the God who made himself known to him, but obscures the divine revelation by the productions of his own undisciplined imagination and arbitrariness. Man cannot excuse himself by pleading that he could not know God

prior to his revelation in Jesus Christ; he could very well know him, namely his majesty as Creator and therefore also the fact that he belongs to God. It is his selfishness, however, which prevents this knowledge from becoming practically effective. He does not want to submit and has no intention of being grateful. Thus the pagan religious world originates as the result of God's revelation and man's sin. Its distinctive mark is image-worship, the failure to distinguish between Creator and creature, the darkening of man's innermost being by his cutting himself loose from God.

This is the exchange by which man in his presumption has made of himself a fool and a madman.

²⁴Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

²⁶For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, ²⁷and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

²⁸And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. ²⁹They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips, ³⁰slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

³²Though they know God's decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them, but approve those who practice them.

The original perversion of man's relationship to God is followed by the perversion of all human relationships. This happens by God's will, it is the effect of his wrath. The basic relationship among men is that of the sexes. For in that way God gives every man his life. Thus the perversion of the divine relationship is especially recognizable in the perversion of the

sexual relations. The apostle calls things by their names. Missionary earnestness is incompatible with prudery. But the unmasking of sexual sins is followed by the total picture of the destroyed human fellowship. The result of the stock-taking runs: Man knows indeed the divine command, just as he knows of God from the revelation of his works, yet he takes no notice of it but lives and loves in opposition to God's order. That is the fatal "exchange" which out of what God has created makes that which is sinful and which gives the real life of man its character. Just as the honouring of the Creator is the proper and highest meaning of life, so the idolatrous dishonouring of the Creator and the unnatural, inhuman violation of his creation is the horrible paradox into which man has fallen.

GOD'S WRATH AND JUDGMENT
ON JEWS AND GENTILES (2: 1-29)

¹Therefore you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. ²We know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who do such things. ³Do you suppose, O man, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? ⁴Or do you presume upon the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? ⁵But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. ⁶For he will render to every man according to his works: ⁷to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life; ⁸but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. ⁹There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, ¹⁰but glory and honour and peace for every one who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. ¹¹For God shows no partiality.

Is not the picture drawn in the first chapter a caricature of humanity? Are there not also, besides those who sink into

evil and delight in it, others who by their indignation separate themselves from evil? Yes, if they only did this! For in reality they themselves participate in evil which they perceive and condemn so severely in others. The knowledge of the good is not the good itself. Paul is now thinking—especially, yet not exclusively—of the Jews. Their better knowledge of God's will allows them to believe that they themselves are better and that they will therefore escape God's judgment of wrath. But God never asks about knowledge but about action. He does not ask Christians about their knowledge, but their action; not even a Christian knowledge will help on the day of judgment; for when a man is judged the decision depends exclusively on what he has done. There is, therefore, the difference between those who stand on the day of judgment and those who fail when God will judge according to the action.

What is said here in the second chapter is not revoked later on. At the day of divine judgment actions are decisive. This does not stand in opposition to the doctrine of grace and faith developed in the subsequent chapters but is, on the contrary, at one with it. The question is not whether the doing of good is decisive, but whether one arrives at the doing of good by one's own strength. The curse of moralism is not the fact that the action is being undertaken seriously, but the self-deception of the unredeemed man who regards the action as done in his own strength. That he confuses his knowledge of the good with the doing of the good—this is what makes him untruthful; the Pharisaism of correct doctrine, the hypocrisy which mistakes the idea for the reality.

It is brought to the surface at the divine judgment; nothing stands on the day of judgment except the reality of the good. That this is simply the gift of God is proved by the continuation of the epistle. The day of judgment reveals what is good and what is evil; thus responsibility is ultimately the same as having to give an account of oneself before God. The thought of the judgment debases the good will only when prospect of reward and fear of punishment determine the action. There can be no question of this here; the thought of judgment is not the motivation for the action, yet it secures to the action its eternal gravity. But much has still to be said concerning the real reason for the action.