



ANCIENT CHRISTIAN TEXTS

COMMENTARIES ON
ROMANS AND
1-2 CORINTHIANS

Ambrosiaster

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY
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INTRODUCTION TO ANCIENT CHRISTIAN TEXTS

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AMBROSIASTER *Commentary on Romans*

Preface

Everything needs an introduction if it is to be properly understood, and the plan of a work can be more easily explained if its origin is known. We shall therefore point out the form and purpose of the letter before us, so that what we are saying may be seen to be true.

Paul discusses four main points in his letter to the Romans. He begins with the statement that one part of the human race exists by its physical nature and the other exists through the law. This second group stands head and shoulders above the rest, and the other nations all learn what they know in and through it.

The first point he discusses is how [the human race] manifests itself, what it is now, what it was originally, and to whom it belongs, and in this way he disposes of heresies. The second point he makes is that human beings did not submit to the one God by the logic of nature, but instead engaged in dishonest and wicked activities for which they were rejected by God, so that those who believe are rewarded. The third point is that they disobeyed the law which had been given to them, with the result that God preferred the Jews to the Greeks.¹ The fourth point is that Paul teaches that when they rejected Christ, the Jews departed from the law and promise of God and became like the Gentiles, so that now both of them stand in need of the mercy of God, hoping for salvation not by the law but by faith in Christ Jesus.

It is clear that in the times of the apostles there were Jews living in Rome because they

lived in the Roman Empire. Those of them who believed in Christ passed this belief on to the Romans, so that they too might keep the law by confessing Christ. Having heard reports of the power and virtue of Christ, the Romans were quick to believe in him, although they were cautious too, and not unreasonably, for some of them had been badly instructed and needed immediate correction, after which they remained faithful to him. Here we are given to understand that those Jews who believed in Christ did not accept that he was God from God, because they thought that this was a denial of monotheism.

For this reason Paul says that they did not receive the spiritual grace of God and so they lacked assurance of faith. These Jews were the same people who had undermined the [faith of the] Galatians, causing them to turn away from the teaching of the apostles. The apostle was therefore angry with them, because although they had been well taught, they had been easily led astray. He had no need to be angry with the Romans though. Instead, he praised their faith, particularly as they had not seen any signs of [miraculous] powers, nor had they received their faith in Christ from any of the apostles (even if this faith was more a matter of words than of substance), nor had the mystery of the cross of Christ been explained to them. As a result, when some people (like Aquila and Priscilla) turned up with the right doctrine, questions arose about the rights and wrongs of eating meat [which had been sacrificed to idols] and about whether the hope

¹That is, non-Jews.

which they placed in Christ would be enough to save them, or whether they had to keep the law as well.

This is why Paul went to so much trouble to wean them away from the law, because *the law and the prophets are until John*.¹ The gospel established them in the faith of Christ alone and justified them more or less in opposition to the law, not by destroying it but by showing that Christianity was superior. For he asserts that Christ had been promised in such a way that the law would cease when he came, though not entirely. Rather, an abbreviated form of the law would emerge which would provide salvation. Many things had been handed down by their ancestors and had become a burden because of the hardness of their hearts, but the mercy of God had put an end to this through Christ, who forgave all that was past. Therefore, whoever wanted to go on living under the law was ungrateful for the mercy of God. For Moses had said: *So you shall make the children of Israel afraid*² so that whatever way they might turn they would still have the law and not be without the comfort [of God]. So, in order to tell them to put their hope of life and salvation in Christ apart from the law, and to teach them that he is the Lord of all things, Paul began his letter as follows.

Romans 1

¹Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God,

Among our ancestors, names were given for a reason. Isaac was called after laughter and Jacob was so named because of the heel.³ Saul was so called because of his restlessness, but after he was converted, he changed his name to Paul, and the change was permanent. *Saul* means *restlessness*, or *trial*, so when he came

to faith in Christ he called himself *Paul*, in other words, *rest*, because our faith is peace. Whereas previously he had inflicted trials on the servants of God because of his desire to fulfill the law, later he himself endured trials on account of the hope which he had once denied, because of his love of Judaism.

In calling himself a *servant of Jesus Christ*, Paul showed that he had been delivered from the law. He put both names, Jesus and Christ, in order to signify the person of God and man, for in both he is Lord, as Peter the apostle testified, saying: *He is the Lord of all*.⁴ And because he is Lord, he is also God, as David says: *For the Lord himself is God*.⁵ The heretics deny this. Marcion, it seems, denied Christ and his body out of hatred for the law, although he confessed Jesus. The Jews and Photinus denied that Jesus was God, out of their zeal for the law. Whenever Scripture says either Jesus or Christ, it sometimes means the person of God, and sometimes the person of the man, for example: *there is one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things*.⁶

Called to be an apostle. Because Paul acknowledged the Lord and confessed him, he became the perfect servant, he also showed that he had been promoted, saying that he was called to be an apostle, in other words, a messenger sent by the Lord to do his work. By this he showed that he had merit with God because he served Christ and not the law.

Set apart for the gospel of God. The gospel of God is good news, by which sinners are called to forgiveness. For since as a Pharisee the apostle had held a teaching post among the Jews, he now says that he has been set apart from the preaching of Judaism for the gospel of God, so that by abandoning the law, he might preach Christ, who justifies those who believe in him, which the law could not do. This does not go against the law, but affirms it, since the

¹Lk 16:16. ²A misreading of Lev 15:31. ³On Isaac, see Gen 21:1-7. On Jacob, see Gen 25:26. He came out of the womb clutching his twin-brother Esau's heel. ⁴Acts 10:36. ⁵Ps 100:3. ⁶1 Cor 8:6.

law itself says that this would happen in the future. In the words of Isaiah the prophet: *There will come from Zion one who will break and remove the captivity of Jacob, and this will be a testimony of me, when I shall take away their sins*.¹

²which he had promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures

Which he had promised. In order to prove that the hope of faith was fulfilled and completed in Christ, Paul says that Christ's gospel was already promised by God beforehand, so that on the basis of the promise Paul could teach that Christ was the perfect author of (eternal) life. Before going to them, he showed them the testimony given to him, to which the apostle Peter also bore witness: *There is no other name given under heaven by which people must be saved*.²

Through his prophets. In order to show even more clearly that the coming of Christ was a saving event, Paul also indicated the people through whom God gave his promise, so that it might be seen from them just how true and magnificent the promise is. For nobody makes use of great forerunners to announce some minor thing.

In the holy Scriptures. Paul added this on top of his argument, in order to give greater confidence to believers and show his approval of the law. The Scriptures are holy because they condemn sins, and because they contained the covenant of the One God and of the incarnation of the Son of God for the salvation of mankind, [which was brought about] by the evidence of numerous signs.

³the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh

Concerning his Son. Since God promised his

own Son to the world, it was fitting that he should promise him through great men, so that from them it might be known how very powerful the one who was being preached was, and so that he might include his future coming in the holy Scriptures. What is preached by the holy Scriptures cannot be shown to be false.

Who was descended from the seed of David according to the flesh. He who was the Son of God according to the Holy Spirit, that is, according to God (because God is Spirit and without any doubt holy), is said to have been made the Son of God according to the flesh by Mary, as it is written: *The Word became flesh*.³ Christ Jesus is both Son of God and Son of Man, so that just as he is truly God, so also he is truly man. He would not be true man if he were not of flesh and soul, [which he needed in order to] be perfect. For although he was the Son of God in eternity, he was not known by the creation until God wanted him to be revealed for the salvation of mankind. At that point, God made him visible and corporeal, because he wanted him to be known by his power to cleanse people from their sins by overcoming death in the flesh. For that reason, he was made of the seed of David, so that just as he was born a king from God before the beginning of time, he would also acquire birth from a king according to the flesh. He was made from a virgin by the work of the Holy Spirit, in other words, born, so that, by the reverence reserved for him because of this fact, he who by his birth was distinguished from the law of nature might be recognized as being more than a man, just as had been predicted by Isaiah the prophet: *Behold a virgin will conceive in her womb*.⁴ Thus, when the newborn child appeared to be worthy of honor, the providence of God could be discerned with regard to a future visitation of the human race.

¹Cf. Is 27:9. ²Acts 4:12. ³Jn 1:1. ⁴Is 7:14.

⁴and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord,

When Paul speaks about the Son of God he is pointing out that God is Father, and by adding the Spirit of holiness he indicates the mystery of the Trinity. He who was incarnate obscured what he really was, but he was predestined according to the Spirit of holiness to be manifested in power as the Son of God by rising from the dead, as it is written in Psalm 85: *Truth is risen from the earth.*¹ Every ambiguity and hesitation was made clear and sure by his resurrection, so that when the centurion saw the wonders, he confessed that the man on the cross was the Son of God.² When Christ died, even his disciples doubted this, as Cleopas and Emmaus said: *We thought that he was the one who would begin to set Israel free.*³ But the Lord himself had said: *When you have lifted up the Son of man, then you will know that I am he,*⁴ and also: *When I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all men to myself.*⁵ Note that Paul did not say: *because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ* but *because of his resurrection from the dead*, because the resurrection of Christ led to the general resurrection. This power and victory in Christ appears to be all the greater, in that a dead man could do the same things as he did when he was alive. By this fact he appeared to dissolve death, in order to redeem us. Thus Paul calls him our Lord.

⁵through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations,

After the resurrection, Christ was revealed as the Son of God in power. He gave grace to make sinners righteous and appointed

apostles, of whom Paul says here that he is one. The apostleship was granted by the grace of God's gift, and not because the apostles were Jews. They received this authority from God the Father through Christ the Lord. As his representatives, they could make his teaching acceptable by signs of power, so that the unbelieving Jews, who had been jealous of this power when they saw it in the Savior, might be all the more tormented at seeing it admired by the masses in his servants. For power bears witness to the teaching [of Christ], so that although what is preached is incredible to the world, it is made credible by deeds. Paul says that the apostles have been sent to preach the faith to all nations, so that they might obey and be saved. In this way, it would appear that the gift of God has been granted not only to the Jews but to all the nations, and that it is the will of God, to have pity on all in Christ and through Christ, by the preaching of his ambassadors, that is, *for his name*. As he says elsewhere: *For which mission we are appointed.*⁶

⁶including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ;

That is, by the mission of us who are preaching about the name of Christ to all the nations, among whom you too have been called, because the gift of God has been sent to all. When the Romans hear that they have been called along with others, they will know that they must not act as if they are under the law, since the other nations accepted the faith of Christ without the law of Moses.

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.

¹Ps 85:11. ²Cf. Mt 27:54. ³Lk 24:21. Ambrosiaster mistook Emmaus for Cleopas's companion, rather than the name of the place where they lived. ⁴Jn 8:28. ⁵Jn 12:32. ⁶Cf. 2 Cor 5:20.

To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints. Although Paul seems to be writing to the Romans in general, he specifies that he is really only writing to those who are in the love of God. Who are these people, if not those who believe the right things about the Son of God? They are the ones who are holy, and who are said to have been called. For someone who understands incorrectly is not said to have been called, just as those who act according to the law have not rightly understood Christ and have done injury to God the Father by doubting whether there is full salvation in Christ. Therefore they are not holy, nor are they said to have been called.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul says that grace and peace are with those who believe rightly. It is grace by which sinners have been cleansed, and peace, by which former enemies have been reconciled to the Creator, as the Lord says: *Whatever house you enter and they receive you, say: Peace be to this house.*¹ In order to teach that without Christ there is no peace or hope, Paul added that grace and peace are not only from God the Father, but also from the Lord Jesus Christ. He says that God is our Father because of our origin, since all things are from him, and that Christ is our Lord, because we have been redeemed by his blood and made sons of God.

⁸First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.

After finishing his introduction, and before going any farther, Paul bears witness to his joy as the apostle to the Gentiles, that although the Romans ruled the world, they had submitted to the Christian faith, which seemed lowly and stupid to the wise of this world. As there were many things about the Romans which

¹Lk 10:5.

he could rejoice in—for they were mindful of discipline, and eager to do good works, more interested in doing right than in talking about it, which is not far from God's religion—nevertheless, he says that above all he rejoices in this: that word of their faith was circulating everywhere. For it seemed to be a wonderful thing that the lords of the Gentiles should bow before a promise made to the Jews. Even if they did not believe correctly, Paul was still pleased that they had begun to worship one God in the name of Christ and knew that they could advance further. For this reason he reveals his love for them, when he rejoices at their good start and encourages them to go on. He therefore says that he is giving thanks to God, even though they have not yet received everything, because God is the source of all things. The entire dispensation of our salvation is from God, indeed, but through Christ, not through the law or any prophet, which is why Paul says that he is giving thanks to God, but through Christ, because the report of their faith was an encouragement to many to attribute it to the providence of God through Christ. Either the others who believed rejoiced, having been strengthened by seeing their rulers and brothers established in the faith, or at least those who did not believe could easily have done so by following their example. For the lesser quickly copies what he sees being done by the greater.

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,

In order to encourage brotherly love, Paul calls on God, whom he serves, as a witness, to whom he prays on their behalf, not by keeping the law but by the gospel of his Son, in other words, not by that which Moses the servant handed down, but by that which the most

beloved Son taught. For the servant is as far from his Lord as the gospel is from the law, not because the law is wrong, but because the gospel is better. Therefore Paul serves God in the gospel of his Son in order to show that it is God's will that men should believe in Christ.

Whom I serve. How? In my spirit, says Paul, not in the circumcision made with hands, nor in new moons, nor in the sabbath or the choice of foods, but in the spirit, that is, in the mind. Because God is a spirit, it is right that he should be served in spirit or in the mind for whoever serves him in his mind serves him in faith. This is what the Lord said to the Samaritan woman when she asked him whether God wanted to be worshiped on the mountain, saying: *The time is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father is looking for such people to worship him. God is a spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth,*¹ so that it is not the place but the devout mind which validates the prayer. This is what it means to worship God the spirit and Christ in spirit and in truth, the One from whom all things come and the one through whom are all things. The Father is looking for people like this to worship him.

Paul remembers them in his prayers, in order to sow brotherly love among them; indeed, he makes this his desire for them. For who would not love someone when he hears that that person remembers him? For if they had willingly listened to the teaching brought to them in the name of Christ by those who were not sent, how much more would they want to listen to Paul, whom they knew was an apostle, and whose words were accompanied by power!

¹⁰*asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you.*

Paul here indicates the point of his prayer for

the Romans. He says that he asks God that he might come to Rome in order to strengthen them by the will of God, whose gift he preaches. That strengthening will only occur if what has to be done is done by the will of God. Therefore he prays that, whatever the excuse, an opportunity may be given to him to come to the city. He was already busy preaching to others and would consider his journey successful if he came by God's will, because the will of God would have prepared the way. A journey is successful if the labor of traveling has not been endured in vain. Paul asks that God will fill the Romans by calling them to [receive] his grace. He speaks with eagerness of mind, for he desires their response, knowing that it will be to their mutual advantage, as he says elsewhere: *For what is our joy and crown? Is it not you at our Lord's coming?*² The apostle will bear more fruit if he wins many over. If there is greater joy if the powerful people of this world are converted to Christ, because they are so much more serious enemies, how much more are they indispensable as converts, and the apostle will bear more fruit if he can win many of them over. By God's will, the opportunity [for Paul to go to Rome] was eventually given. He was arrested and appealed to Caesar, so that in the end, he was sent to the city of Rome for a different reason, but it was by God's will and in fulfillment of his own desires. When Paul was shipwrecked, God appeared to him and said: *Do not be afraid, Paul. For as you have borne witness to me at Jerusalem, so also will you do at Rome.*³

¹¹*For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you,*

This confirmation requires three persons: God as helper, the apostle as minister, and the people as receiver. Paul here shows the will of his desire, and what his wish for the Romans is.

When he says: *that I might impart some spiritual gift to you*, he means that they have followed carnal ideas. Although they were acting in the name of Christ, they were not following what Christ taught, but those things which had been handed down to them by the Jews. Paul wants to come to them as quickly as possible in order to take them away from that tradition and give them a spiritual gift in order to win them for God and make them partakers of spiritual grace so that they might be perfect in faith and behavior. From this we learn that in the preceding verses it was not the content of their faith that he had praised, but their readiness and devotion to Christ. Though calling themselves Christians, they acted just as if they were under the law, as that had been handed down to them. For the mercy of God had been given for this reason: that they should give up the works of the law, as I have often said, because God, taking pity on our weakness, decreed that the human race was saved by faith alone, along with the natural law.

When he admonishes them in writing and draws them away from carnal thoughts, when he says that his presence is necessary in order to impart a spiritual grace to them, when what he writes is spiritual, what does this mean? He does not want his teaching to be applied in a way he does not intend, for that is what happens with heretics. So he desires to be present with them and pass on to them the gospel teaching in the precise sense in which he writes it, lest by the authority of his letter their error should be confirmed rather than removed. [Paul says that] if he were with them he would be able to convince them by power, if words failed to persuade them.

¹²*that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.*

Paul says that he will be comforted by them

if they understand spiritual things, because although he may rejoice at their faith, he nevertheless grieves that they have not received the faith rightly. The apostle was the type to grieve for the faults of others as if they were his own. *And we are comforted by this*, he says, *by one and the same faith*, because then the act of comforting is seamless. It is by the unity of faith that the Romans would be brought to maturity in Christ, and by this means the ministry of the spiritual grace, given by the apostle's preaching of the gospel, produces its own fruit.

¹³*I 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.*

Paul here indicates his plan and intention. He does not doubt that they already know it from those brothers who had come to Rome from Jerusalem or the neighboring cities for some reason, perhaps because of their religion, as we read of Aquila and Priscilla, who would have told the Romans of Paul's intention. As he had often wanted to come but had been prevented, it came about that he wrote them a letter in case they should continue in their unwholesome habits for too long to be easily corrected. He calls them brothers not only because they had been born again, but also because there were some among them who believed rightly, however few they may have been. Incidentally, this is why he says that they are *called to be saints*.¹ What does it mean to be called to be saints? If they are already saints, how can they be called to be sanctified? But this is part of the foreknowledge of God, because God knows those who will be saints. Those who are already with him are saints and remain called forever. Yet Paul says that he has been prevented up to the time the epistle was

¹Jn 4:23-24. ²1 Thess 2:19. ³Cf. Acts 27:24.

¹Rom 1:7.

written, and prevented by God, who knew that the Romans were still unprepared and sent the apostle to other cities that were already able to receive the truth. Although they acted in the name of the Savior, they were as yet prevented by their negligence from being worthy to learn spiritual things. Paul and Silas had wanted to go to Bithynia, but they were prevented from doing so by the Holy Spirit.¹ Why was this, unless he knew that such a visit would have no result? Among the Corinthians too, Paul was reminded by God, who told him, *Speak and do not be silent, for I have many people in this city.*²

Paul did not say that he was prevented for no reason, but he wanted them to know why he was delayed, and he urged them to get ready, so that when they heard that a spiritual grace was to be given to them they would make themselves worthy to receive it.

Paul declared that he wanted to come to them for their common good so that they might receive the salvation of spiritual grace, having a reasoned profession of their faith, and that he might have some fruit of his ministry from God, having provoked them to the right faith by the example of the other Gentiles. For a person will be more eager for what is given to him if he sees many others responding to it.

¹⁴I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish:

Paul says that he is under obligation to those whom he names because he was sent for the purpose of preaching to everyone. For this reason he states that they are all under obligation to believe in God the Creator, from whom and through whom are all things, for obligation and honor form part of the salvation of the believer. He wrote *Greeks* instead of *Gentiles*, but this includes those who are called Romans, whether by birth or by adoption, and barbarians, who are those who are not Romans,

who belong to a hostile race, and who are not Gentiles. He speaks of those who are wise, because they are learned in worldly sciences and are called wise in the world, whether they are stargazers, geometers, mathematicians, grammarians, orators or musicians. Paul shows that none of these things is of any advantage, nor are these people truly wise, unless they believe in Christ. He calls them fools because in their simplicity they lacked knowledge of spiritual things. He testifies that he has been sent to preach to them all, but he says nothing about the Jews because he is the teacher of the Gentiles. This is why he says that he is under obligation, because he has accepted this teaching in order to pass it on, and in passing it on, to acquire it himself.

¹⁵so I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

Although Paul says that he has been sent to preach to all the nations, yet he asserts that he is eager to impart the gospel of the grace of God to the Romans, among whom the capital and seat of the Roman Empire lies. For it would be to the benefit and peace of the members if the head were not uncertain. Therefore he opts for the peace of the Romans, that Satan might not get too involved with them, and that he might have even richer fruits of his labor.

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¹Acts 16:7. ²Acts 18:9-10.