

Studies in Romans.

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SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDY.

CHRYSOSTOM had this Epistle read to him once a week. Luther speaks of it as "the chief book of the New Testament." Coleridge calls it "the profoundest book in existence." Melancthon, in order to become thoroughly acquainted, copied it twice with his own hand, and it was the book which he lectured on most frequently. Godet remarks that "in studying the Epistle to the Romans we feel ourselves at every word face to face with the unfathomable." These testimonies indicate at once the importance of the study and the need of all possible guidance.

I.—*Reasons for Study.*

1. The *Intellectual Value* is very great. Romans is concerned with a number of the deepest problems of Christian thought, which are well worthy of all the attention we can bestow upon them. Then, again, the logical arrangement of the Epistle is another reason for intellectual effort. Indeed, it is not too much to say that a study of Romans will provide a mental gymnastic of the finest type. As Dr. Garvie rightly remarks (Introduction, p. 35), "the logical method of the Epistle will repay study," for St. Paul uses various forms of argument that necessarily appeal to the thoughtful mind (see Garvie, pp. 36, 37). Dr. David Brown's fine testimony is well worth quoting :

"Its texture is so firm, its every vein so full, its very fibres and ligatures so fine and yet strong, that it requires not only to be again and again surveyed as a whole, and mastered in its primary ideas, but to be dissected in detail, and with unwearying patience, studied in its minutest features, before we can be said to have done it justice. Not only every sentence teems with thought, but every clause ; while in some places every word may be said either to suggest some weighty thought, or to indicate some deep emotion " ("Romans," p. xviii).

2. The *Historical* Value is equally real. The Epistle is largely occupied with the great thought of Christianity and the world of St. Paul's day, and in many respects it is an expression of Pauline Christianity. Two books of importance, covering the substance of the first eight chapters, have both been entitled the "Gospel according to St. Paul" (Dr. Oswald Dykes and Dr. W. P. Du Bose). Not the least important element of this historical aspect is the witness the Epistle gives to the relation of St. Paul to our Lord, for herein we have depicted the Christ of St. Paul in relation to the Christ of the Gospels. It has often been pointed out that the modern cry "Back to Christ" does not and cannot mean "Away from St. Paul." The Apostle's personal experience of the Christ of heaven, as recorded in this Epistle, amply justifies and vindicates the Evangelists' accounts of Christ on earth. In Romans, too, we have brought before us the one, if not the two, great controversies of the Apostle's life, and as these controversies occupied a large part of his career, we can see at once the historical value of the Epistle. Not least of all we have in Romans what Sir William Ramsay has rightly called St. Paul's "Philosophy of History." The universalism of the Epistle, too, is noteworthy, and its world-wide view naturally and necessarily commends it to the consideration of all serious historical students.

3. The *Theological* Value must not be overlooked. While it does not contain a complete statement of Christian doctrine, since there is no special emphasis on Christology, as in Colossians and Ephesians, and no teaching about eschatology, as in Corinthians and Thessalonians, yet it deals with a number of great theological principles in a thoroughly comprehensive way, and no one can ponder what is here said on such subjects as Sin, Righteousness, Grace, Law, Justice, and Love, without being made conscious of the profound theological importance of the Epistle. There is a remarkable care shown in the presentation of the truth, and an equally remarkable balance of statement, and all this goes to show that the thorough

study of the Epistle is really a theological education in itself. And lest we should be repelled by the thought of theology as something abstract, remote from life, and unpractical, it must be noticed that the theology of Romans is always based on the exegesis of the Apostle's words. Nothing in its way is more striking than the fact that the theology which deals with some of the profoundest truths of the Christian religion comes directly out of the grammatical and accurate interpretation of the Apostle's teaching. The more it is studied from the theological standpoint the more it will be seen that its value for Christian doctrine is of the very highest.

4. The *Spiritual* Value of the Epistle follows as a necessary consequence. In it will be found some of the prime secrets of the spiritual life. Its first great truth is the reality, extent, and awfulness of sin. This leads necessarily to the teaching on Redemption, with its spiritual results in the reconciliation of the soul to God, its deliverance from sin, and its renovation by the Holy Spirit. Holiness is the very centre of the Epistle (chaps. vi.-viii.), and may be described, in a word, as "God dwelling in the heart." But this indwelling presence of God for holiness comes on the one hand from the reception of the Atonement of Christ through faith (chaps. iii.-v.), and, on the other hand, expresses itself in loyalty, love, and obedience (chaps. xii.-xv.). The more the spiritual life is allowed to ponder the Apostle's words, the stronger will be its fibre and force. As Luther rightly said of this Epistle :

"It is the true masterpiece of the New Testament, and the very purest Gospel, which is well worthy and deserving that a Christian man should not only learn it by heart, word for word, but also that he should daily deal with it as the daily bread of men's souls. For it can never be too much or too well read or studied; and the more it is handled the more precious it becomes, and the better it tastes."

And as a modern writer (Dr. Beet) has aptly put it :

"A careful study of the words and arguments of this Epistle will enrich greatly the student's own spiritual life. And this spiritual enrichment will shed important light on the meaning of the Apostle's words. For it will enable us to see the matters about which he writes from his own point of view" ("St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans," p. 27).

5. The *Practical* Value of the Epistle must also be carefully observed. Godet goes as far as to say that "the probability is that every great spiritual revival in the Church will be connected as effect and cause with a deeper understanding of this book" ("Commentary on Romans," vol. i., p. 1). There is much in the past history of the Church which goes to support this statement. Certainly the main factor in the great Reformation movement in the sixteenth century was the teaching of this Epistle and the companion one to the Galatians. While in the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century and the various Evangelistic movements of the nineteenth the truths of Romans have been at the very heart of the situation Dr. David Brown truly remarks that :

"While all Scripture has stamped its impress indelibly on the Christian world, perhaps it is scarcely too much to say, that—apart from the Gospels—for all the *precision* and the *strength* which it possesses, and much more of the *spirituality* and the *fire* which characterize it—the faith of Christendom in its best periods has been more indebted to this Epistle than to any other portion of the living oracles" ("Romans," Introduction, p. xviii).

This at least may be said without the slightest qualification and certainly without the faintest fear of contradiction, that a Christian life nourished on the Epistle to the Romans will never lack the three great requisites of clear perception, strong conviction, and definite usefulness.

II.—*The Methods of Study.*

1. The Epistle should be studied *with all possible intellectual attention and concentration*. It is worthy of all the consideration we can give to it. It is important that the whole Epistle should be read right through in the Revised Version at one sitting, and that this should be done, if possible, day by day for a month. It will not take long, and the advantage will soon be seen to be immense. Failing the possibility of this, one of the great sections of the Epistle should certainly be read over and over again, in order that we may become thoroughly habituated to its general lines of thought. At first there is no need to try to study it deeply, but simply to read it through

with care and attention as we would an ordinary article in a newspaper, or a chapter in a book. Gradually the mind will become accustomed to its teaching, and gain a general impression of its contents and meaning.

2. It should be studied with earnest prayer and personal trust. Intellectual attention alone is insufficient. The Epistle should be regarded as a personal letter to ourselves. Its deepest secrets will only be revealed to the heart that is willing to submit to its teaching and translate it into action. "Access to the inmost sanctuary of Holy Scripture is granted only to those who come to worship" ("St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans," by J. A. Beet, p. 27).

3. It should be studied *with an earnest endeavour to grasp its leading ideas*. The early chapters teach the profound truth that man has always failed to manifest righteousness in his life, and the Epistle deals with this universal failure, and brings before us the message of a new Divine righteousness for guilty man. Thus, the leading ideas may perhaps be summarized as Sin, Guilt, Propitiation, Righteousness, Faith, the Holy Spirit, Consecration, and these indicate in turn man's need of righteousness, and his responsibility for it, and then the ground, the means, the effect, and the proof of that Divine righteousness which is provided by God in Christ.

4. It should be studied *with special reference to its great theme*, as stated in chap. i. 16, 17. In these two verses there are seven terms which go through the entire Epistle, and run through every part of it—God, Gospel, Power, Salvation, Righteousness, Faith, Life. So that the theme of Romans is man's reinstatement in righteousness by the provision found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Salvation is provided and made possible for sinful man by a righteousness which is not his own. Like the warp and woof of a piece of cloth, these great thoughts are the very substance of the Epistle.

5. It should be studied *with all available helps*. The character of this Epistle is such that the aids of scholarship and of spiritual insight are particularly valuable and welcome. Of the many books written on Romans, it is impossible to refer to

more than a few. For all ordinary purposes, the two books by the Bishop of Durham will be ample. As a foundation, his detailed Commentary in the "Cambridge Bible for Schools" should be used, and side by side with it his larger work in the "Expositor's Bible." The latter book is one of the choicest works of scholarly, intellectual, and spiritual exposition, and if only one volume can be obtained this certainly should be the one adopted. The "Century Bible," by Garvie, is also full of suggestion, and if read with constant discrimination will be found very useful, though it is occasionally too free, in the present writer's judgment, in regard to Apostolic authority and inspiration. The little volume, by Dr. David Brown, in the "Handbooks for Bible Classes," is also extremely valuable, and well merits the testimony of a leading American scholar, who said that it was a "perfect book of its kind."

Larger works, involving for their full appreciation a knowledge of Greek, are the Commentaries by Dr. John Brown, Dean Vaughan, Dr. Beet, Dr. Gifford, Drs. Sanday and Headlam, and Dr. Godet. Each has its own particular excellence, though perhaps for general scholarly use that by Dr. Gifford is the most serviceable. It certainly deserves the fine testimony given to it by Drs. Sanday and Headlam, that it is "on the whole the best, as it is the most judicious of all English Commentaries on the Epistle." A list of books will be found in Garvie's Introduction, and a fuller list is provided in the article on Romans in Hastings' "Bible Dictionary," by the Bishop of Exeter, Dr. Robertson.

The value of several Commentaries to the present writer is that they specially bring out and emphasize particular points. Thus, Dr. John Brown is peculiarly helpful on the meaning of faith in Romans iv. ; Dr. Forbes is illuminating on the word "righteousness"; Haldane on the great truth of "imputed righteousness"; while some other works, like a little book called "*Curæ Romanæ*," by Walford (now out of print), which are almost entirely unknown, frequently shed light on points which other writers fail to elucidate.

In connection with Romans, it is very important to remember that the older Commentaries should not be overlooked or despised. With many of the books of the New Testament the more modern the Commentary, the better, but with Romans this is not necessarily the case; and among the older Commentaries it is safe to say that Calvin, Hodge, Haldane, and Chalmers will never be superseded.

Dr. Alexander Whyte once said that whenever a new book on Romans comes out, and is sent to him for consideration by its publisher, he at once turns to chap. vii. to see the author's treatment, and according to his view of that important section Dr. Whyte decides on the value of the entire work. While this may perhaps be too sweeping and severe a test, it is pretty certain that the treatment of chap. vii. is a good criterion of the value of a Commentary on Romans, and in this connection it is only right to say that, while every commentator endeavours to face the great question involved in that chapter, there are comparatively few that seem to take into consideration all the elements necessary for its complete elucidation. The present writer has found one little work of particular value in shedding light on chap. vii.—“Romans VII. : What does it Teach?” by Laicus (S. W. Partridge and Co.).

Last, but not least, one of the very best helps to the study of Romans will be found in the little volume by the Rev. W. H. T. Gairdner of Cairo, entitled “Helps to the Study of the Epistle to the Romans” (Student Christian Movement). Its small size and its terse comments may perhaps lead some people to overlook the fact that it is based on a close and continuous study of the very best authorities. It will prove one of the truest aids to the interpretation of this great Epistle.

The Epistle is, however, so profound in its thought and so far-reaching in its spiritual experience that, after personal study and side by side with it, it is undoubtedly valuable to consult every available Commentary. There are very few books on Romans that do not help us to enter in some degree, and at some point or another, into the Apostle's mind.