



The Letter to the Romans

Good News for All People

1. INTRODUCTION TO ROMANS

Romans 1:1

Imagine you were going to write a letter to a small church in a large, world city to encourage them in facing their challenges. What if their city is heavily influenced by contemporary philosophy, so the society doesn't believe in absolute truth, the existence of the one true God, or the universe as God's creation? What if their city is rife with the inevitable outcomes of rejecting God? So marriage and family is degraded. Homosexuality, polygamy, polyamory, and free love are practiced and celebrated. The worship of all gods is equally welcomed.

What if their city is multi-ethnic, so they have people of different nationalities, languages, and cultural customs in their assembly and their communities? What if their government is oppressive and restrictive of liberties, particularly in the area of religious conscience? What if within the church are people of different levels of maturity and understanding, with many people holding different convictions about what should be done and not done, which creates issues of pride, judgmentalism, and strife?

What if many in the church are plagued by perennial questions? They ask, What about people who die without ever hearing the Gospel? Do Christians still sin after being saved? Why do some believe and others do not? Why did God allow sin in the world? Can a saved person be lost again? Do I really have to pay taxes to an ungodly government? Would a loving God punish sin? Can sincerely good people be saved though they don't believe in Jesus?

What would you do? What would you write to them? You or I could do no better than Paul's letter to the Romans. In this letter, he speaks to all these issues and more.

INTRODUCTION

Romans is a New Testament epistle written to the church, or perhaps churches, in the city of Rome. It was written about the middle of the first century AD. It was written around 2,000 years ago when the Romans ruled the world and tablets weren't either iPads or

Androids, but were beeswax on wood, engraved with a metal stylus. Paul wrote to them of eternity past to eternity future and all mankind in Adam. So, the letter is relevant to all people, even today. The message of Justification by faith in Jesus Christ is good news for all people, and that is the title for our series as we go verse by verse through this entire book. To begin our series through Romans, we want to consider the book as a whole.

AUTHOR, TIME, AND PLACE OF THE LETTER

Romans 1:1 identifies Paul the Apostle as the author of this letter. A man named Tertius was the penman who wrote the letter as Paul dictated it to him (Romans 16:22). Who was Paul? Most of what we know of Paul comes from the book of Acts, with some additional information in the New Testament letters he wrote.

Paul was born a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin in the city of Tarsus in the Roman province of Cilicia. Tarsus was near the southern coast of modern day Turkey. He was a freeborn Roman citizen and was born sometime near to the time Jesus was born in Bethlehem. He spent much of his early life growing up in Jerusalem. There he was trained by the famous rabbi Gamaliel of the Hillel school of the Pharisees. Paul was very zealous for the Pharisaic traditions and belonged to the strictest of the Pharisaic sects.

Paul was still a young man, maybe not yet thirty, when Jesus was crucified outside Jerusalem. Three days after his crucifixion, he was resurrected. Less than two months after Jesus was crucified and resurrected, the Holy Spirit was poured out on the church in Jerusalem and they began publicly proclaiming Jesus Christ, his resurrection, ascension, and return throughout Jerusalem. The church, being led by the Apostles, declared salvation for who repented of their sins and believed in Jesus of Nazareth as the promised Messiah. Thousands of Jews in Jerusalem from all over the Roman empire believed, were saved, were baptized in the name of Jesus, and were joined to the church.

The first church's membership swelled to many, many thousands of members, causing a great stir in Jerusalem. The chief priests and the Sanhedrin council tried to stop the spread of Christianity among the Jewish people. They wanted to stop the preaching of Jesus Christ. Tensions and hostilities rose, culminating in the trial of Stephen before the Sanhedrin. Though Stephen gave powerful defense and witness of Jesus Christ, his trial ended with Stephen being stoned to death and received into Heaven as the first Christian martyr after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

The scene of Stephen's execution is where we first meet Paul, though not by his Roman name Paul, but by his Hebrew name Saul (Acts 7:58). Paul was a consenting witness to that execution by stoning and he rose up from there to become the foremost persecutor of the church in Jerusalem. He used the temple guard to arrest men and women who confessed the name of Jesus and put them in prison for trial. These Jewish Christians would be tortured and even put to death if they did not recant their faith in Jesus' name.

Paul received special authority from the chief priests to travel as far as Damascus, a dis-

tance of about 150 miles, to arrest and bring men and women back to Jerusalem if they were followers of Jesus. While he was on the road and near to Damascus, the resurrected Jesus appeared to Paul and Paul himself was converted to faith in Jesus Christ. He became a Christian, a follower of Jesus. He confessed Jesus Christ and was baptized in the name of Jesus by Ananias in the city of Damascus. He immediately began preaching Jesus and faced fierce persecution himself. He had to escape from the city at night, with the help of other Christians.

The early years for Paul after his conversion are mostly obscured. He spent three years in Arabia, receiving revelation directly from Jesus. Many years later, Barnabas would find Paul in Tarsus and bring him back to Antioch in Syria to be with him and the church that was there by that time. He spent some time with the church there before the Antiochian church sent Barnabas and Paul out to preach the Gospel and plant churches as the Holy Spirit directed. Paul then became Paul the missionary, which is mostly how we think of him today.

Paul wrote this letter in the late stage of his life from the city of Corinth. He referred to Cenchrea in Romans 16:1, which was a port just a few miles from Corinth. Paul was staying in Corinth for three months before sailing for Jerusalem (Acts 20:2-3). At the time of writing this letter, Paul was preparing to go to Jerusalem to deliver the offering he had been collecting. This offering was from predominantly Gentile churches throughout the Empire for the church in Jerusalem (Romans 15:25-27).

By the time of writing, Paul had preached the Gospel from Jerusalem all the way to Illyricum (Romans 15:9). Illyricum was a Roman province that lay to the east of Italy across the Adriatic Sea. Illyricum included parts of modern day Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina. He hadn't yet made it to Rome, but he wanted to go there. Paul had actually completed his primary missionary journeys by this time, around 57 AD, and had been preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ for around 25 years.

RECIPIENTS OF THE LETTER

Romans 1:7 identifies the recipients of the letter as all the saints in Rome. Paul wrote to the church, or churches, in Rome. Rome was a city with millions of people at the time. The New Testament does not record any information about the founding of the first church in Rome. There were Jews in Jerusalem from Rome on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was given to the church (Acts 2:10). They certainly could have been among the thousands of Jews who came to believe in Jesus in the short time following.

After the death of Stephen, the church began spreading out and new churches were formed in various places around and outside of Jerusalem. In AD 49, a little over a decade later, Emperor Claudius banished Jews from the city of Rome. There were Jewish Christians affected, such as Aquila and Priscilla, whom Paul met in Ephesus (Acts 18:2). This edict would have left a mostly Gentile church, or churches, in Rome. By the time of Paul's letter, Jews had been allowed back in Rome. In fact, Aquila and Priscilla were apparently back there (Romans 16:3). The time between the edict and the writing of this letter was around

eight years. During that time, the church, or churches, would have continued and likely added more Gentile converts. Even after many Jews returned to Rome, the churches were probably majority Gentile in membership.

The historical information is incomplete, but the picture just painted does make sense with the letter to the Romans. Paul addresses Jews directly (Romans 4:1; 7:1; 16:3-4, 7, 11), and addresses Gentiles directly (Romans 1:6; 11:13-25). In the letter, Paul wrote of the place of the old covenant law (2-4), the nation of Israel and the hope of restoration (9-11). He also rebukes the Gentiles for boasting against the Jews (11), and he focuses on the Gospel implication of united Jews and Gentiles in the same church body (14-15). Paul wrote to churches with mixtures of Gentiles and Jews, who would've faced the same problems and challenges that other churches faced with similar diversity.

OCCASION AND PURPOSE FOR THE LETTER

Paul doesn't indicate any specific occasion for writing the letter, but a good opportunity is suggested. Paul was in Corinth and about to leave for Jerusalem. Right after leaving Corinth, he met the elders from the church in Ephesus at Miletus and said this about his going to Jerusalem: "And now, behold, I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there: Save that the Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me" (Acts 20:22-23). He knew trouble was waiting for him, but he didn't know exactly what would happen. He hoped to visit Rome after going to Jerusalem (Romans 1:13; 15:24-28). Add to this that he had a convenient way to get the letter to Rome by Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2), and he had a good opportunity for writing.

We can't properly speak of one purpose for writing this letter, since a few purposes can be seen in the letter. One purpose was to advise of his travel plans. Paul did want to visit the churches in Rome (Romans 1:13). He was first going to Jerusalem to deliver the offering (Romans 15:22-33), and he was obviously concerned about that trip and asked for their prayers. He planned to visit Rome after Jerusalem and he wanted to preach the Gospel in the new territory to the west in Spain. He also wanted their help in that endeavor.

Another purpose Paul had for writing was to address current issues. From early on in his ministry, Paul clarified the Gospel. He explained justification by faith, the place of the old covenant law, and the unified relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians. An early example of that is Paul's sermon in the synagogue at Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:13-52), the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:1-31), and Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia.

The body of the letter to the Romans speaks to this purpose. Read in this broader context, we can understand why Paul included what he did in this letter. The Romans letter is usually considered a very theological, or doctrinal, letter. It is that, but it is not a full systematic Christian theology. Paul wrote what he did in the main part of the letter to get to the crucial chapters 14 and 15. There he applies the Gospel to the relationships between Jews and Gentiles in the same church body.

MESSAGE OF THE LETTER

The major teaching of Romans is the explanation of the Gospel. Paul uses that word around 13 times in the letter. It is most often used in chapters 1 and 15, the beginning and the end of the letter. The Gospel theme is stated in Romans 1:16-17, which heads the body of the letter. Paul touches on various doctrines relevant to salvation: original sin and the federal headship of Adam, total human depravity and inability, God's wrath and judgment, election and predestination, justification and sanctification by faith, the headship of Jesus and imputed righteousness through faith, adoption as God's children, perseverance, and glorification.

Paul brings out the implications of the Gospel in this letter. He addresses how Christians should live in this world. He writes of fighting temptation and sin. He writes about faithful service. He writes of the relationship of Christians to the old covenant law. He also addresses the unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ.

We can broadly outline the book along these lines.

1. Chapters 1-4 How the Gospel makes sinners right with God
2. Chapters 5-8 How the Gospel gives us hope in salvation
3. Chapters 9-11 How the Gospel shows God's promises never fail
4. Chapters 12-16 How the Gospel transforms the lives of believers

CONCLUSION

What will happen as a result of this concentrated study of Romans? Of course, I can't say what all will happen. However long this study takes, I know that every week our study will be saturated with the grace of God and the glory of Christ in the Gospel. We will take up very difficult questions and learn the biblical answers. We will learn how the Gospel bears on our daily lives, and how it bears on our conflicts and disputes as a church body. My hope and prayer is that sinners will come to faith in Jesus Christ through this word and that saints will be helped and matured in the faith.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

This series is a verse by verse expository study of the Letter to the Romans. Each sermon typically covers one paragraph of the text of the letter. This PDF is provided freely for personal study. Each sermon has been prepared and preached by Jeff Short, the pastor of Harmony Baptist Church.

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