



Introduction to Paul's Epistle to the Romans

Invitation to Study

Paul's Epistle (letter) to the Romans has been called "majestic", "one of the greatest Christian writings," and a "powerful epistle dealing with grand themes of the Christian faith." It is no wonder that this letter's influence has been significant in church history. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, was converted as he read from Romans in A.D. 387. Augustine brilliantly refuted the heresies which threatened the church in his day, and his writings have had a profound influence on Christianity through the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and even today. Later, in the 5th century, John Chrysostom, a great preacher and Bishop of Constantinople, had Romans read aloud to him once a week. Martin Luther's life was changed by coming to understand the meaning of justification by faith in Romans. He wrote, "I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning.... This passage of Paul became to me a gate of heaven" (The 100 Most Important Events In Christian History, A. Kenneth Curtis, J. Stephen Lang, & Randy Petersen). Thus, the seeds of the Reformation were born. In 1738, John Wesley came to assurance of faith through hearing Luther's commentary on Romans read aloud. Wesley took the message of grace and preached throughout England and Scotland, covering 250,000 miles on horseback.

In more recent times, another theologian whose life was changed by the book of Romans is Karl Barth. By the early twentieth century, the Christian world had become steeped in liberalism which emphasized the power and progress of man. Disillusioned by the outbreak of World War I, Barth turned to the Book of Romans. As he read and studied, his life and theology were changed. His "Commentary on Romans" has been called, "a bombshell on the liberal theologians' playground" (The 100 Most Important Events in Christian History).

The leading men of the Protestant Reformation saw Romans as the key to understanding all Scripture. In Romans, Paul draws together the great central doctrines of the Christian faith.

Robert Haldane in his commentary, Exposition of Romans, states that this epistle "is the only part of Scripture which contains a detailed systematic exhibition of the doctrines of Christianity. The great truths which are embodied and inculcated in every other part of the Bible, are here brought together in a

condensed and comprehensive form. More especially, the glorious doctrine of justification by faith is clearly unfolded and exhibited in the strongest light." Is it any wonder that the influence of the letter stands out in history?

Romans is not an easy book, but it is filled with wisdom, inspiration, and direction for those who will take the time to read and study it. By studying the Epistle to the Romans, "an exact and comprehensive knowledge of the distinguishing doctrines of grace may,...by the blessing of God, be obtained. Here they appear in all their native force and clearness, unalloyed with the wisdom of man" (Exposition of Romans, Robert Haldane).

Will you join us in this exciting study of Paul's Epistle to the Romans? Will you come to the study with your heart and mind open to learn, believe, and commit to the sovereign God who has lavished His grace upon sinners such as you and me? The coming weeks of study will be a challenge but also deeply rewarding! *Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God* (Romans 10:17).

Before opening the Scriptures to study this wonderful letter, it is important to establish a basis of understanding. It will be much more meaningful to study with some background knowledge of the writer of Romans, the recipients of the letter, the reasons the letter was written, and the overall themes of Romans.

I. The Writer of Romans

A. The apostle Paul

The apostle Paul introduces himself as the writer in Romans 1:1. We learn from Scripture that Paul, whose Jewish name was Saul, was *a Hebrew of the Hebrews* (Philippians 3:5), meaning that both of his parents were Jewish. He was from the Hebrew tribe of Benjamin (Philippians 3:5). Paul was born in Tarsus, an important city in the Roman province of Cilicia in Asia Minor (Acts 9:11; 21:39), an area corresponding to modern day Turkey. He was a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37; 22:25). As a youth he studied in Jerusalem under the noted rabbi, Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). Paul was a Pharisee, the strictest of the Jewish sects (Acts 23:6; Philippians 3:5). He was unexpectedly converted to Christianity on the road to Damascus, while on a zealous mission to persecute Christians (Acts 9:1-19). He received revelation directly from Jesus Christ while in Arabia for three years after his conversion (Galatians

1:11-12 and 17-18). Consequently, Paul became a missionary throughout the Mediterranean world, both in Asia Minor and in Europe, having been called by God to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15.). The Book of Acts records his three missionary journeys. At the time he wrote Romans, Paul had been preaching the gospel for about 20 years.

B. Written from Corinth

According to Acts 20:1-3, Paul made a return visit to Corinth, a major city in Greece (Achaia), during the latter part of his third missionary journey. By that time he had finished his ministry in the East, having preached the gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum (Romans 15:9). His future plans were to take an offering from the Gentile churches to the needy believers in Jerusalem. From there he planned to head west to Spain to continue his missionary work. His desire was to visit Rome on the way (Romans 15:23-24) and he wrote to the Roman church from Corinth to let them know of his plans.

Direct evidence from the letter confirms that it was written from Corinth. In Romans 16:1-2, Paul refers to Phoebe, commending her to the church at Rome. Phoebe was the helper Paul entrusted with delivery of the letter and a member of the church in Cenchrea, a port of Corinth. Paul's host at the time he wrote Romans was a man named Gaius (Romans 16:23), perhaps the man he baptized while in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:14). Erastus, Timothy, and Sopater were with Paul when he wrote Romans (Romans 16:21-23), and were also with him in Corinth (Acts 19:22; 20:2-4).

C. Date of writing

It is impossible to give an exact date for Romans. Most scholars agree it was somewhere between A.D. 55 and 57. It was written after some of the other Pauline epistles in the New Testament, "but it has been placed first in order among them on account of its excellence, and the abundance and sublimity of its contents" (Exposition of Romans, Robert Haldane).

II. The Recipients of Romans

The destination of Paul's epistle was Rome, which in the middle of the first century, was the largest and most influential city in the Roman Empire. The population was definitely over one million and perhaps as large as four million. Many were slaves. There was a constant stream of travelers through the city: movement of political and military personnel, buyers and sellers of goods, and business people attracted by the busy economy. The Emperor Nero had just begun his rule, reigning from A.D. 54 to 68. Paul's Epistle to the Romans was delivered to the Christians who lived in Rome.

A. Roman believers

Paul's letter is addressed to *All who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints* (Romans 1:7). He mentions that their faith is *spoken of throughout the whole world* (Romans 1:8), suggesting that the church had been established for some length of time. The believers in the Roman church consisted of both Gentiles and Jews.

B. The church at Rome

Because Rome was so large, there were probably many small groups of believers scattered throughout the city rather than a single large church. But how did the church begin? Unfortunately, there is no historical information concerning the founding of the church at Rome. Some believe that Peter was the founder, but this is unlikely because his ministry was to the Jews (Galatians 2:9) and Rome was a Gentile city. It is possible that traveling merchants or migrants were the first to bring Christianity to Rome. But more likely the church was begun by some of the Jews from Rome who had been in Jerusalem and converted to Christianity on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:5-11). Returning home, they would have brought their newfound faith to share with family and friends.

III. Paul's Reasons for Writing Romans

Having traveled throughout Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia preaching the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles in synagogues, streets, homes, and schools, Paul wrote Romans with true missionary zeal and purpose. He had never been to Rome and consequently had never been introduced to the church there. However, his greetings in Romans 16 reveal that he was well acquainted with some of the believers residing in Rome.

Most of Paul's epistles were written to specific churches to deal with local issues: to point out and correct faulty theology or ungodly lifestyles. Romans does not fit into that category. In Romans, Paul presents deep, timeless teachings of the basic truths of Christianity. Romans is a doctrinal masterpiece with truth and application for the church and individuals everywhere. Leon Morris notes "Romans is a letter for those who take their faith seriously and are prepared to think deeply about it" (The Epistle to the Romans).

Following are four reasons Paul may have written Romans.

A. To prepare the way for his visit

Paul had wanted to visit Rome for many years (Romans 16:23) and at last his hopes were about to be realized. He would travel through Rome as he journeyed to Spain.

Having never been to Rome, he wanted to introduce himself to the believers before his planned visit and establish his authority as an apostle called by God to the preaching of the gospel (Romans 1:1).

- B. To secure the support of the Roman church for his mission to Spain

In Romans 15:24, Paul wrote *whenever I journey to Spain, I shall come to you. For I hope to see you on my journey, and to be helped on my way there by you.* Just as the church at Syrian Antioch had supported Paul in his previous missionary endeavors (Acts 13:1-3; 14:26), it seems that he desired the Roman church to assist him as he pushed further west to preach the gospel.

- C. To insure the prayers of the Roman church for his trip to Jerusalem and Rome

Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the spirit, that you strive together with me in prayers to God for me, that I may be delivered from those in Judea who do not believe, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, that I may come to you with joy by the will of God, and may be refreshed together with you. (Romans 15:30-32).

- D. To confirm the apostolic teaching of the gospel

As previously stated, the Roman church had not been established by an apostle. (See II. B. The church at Rome.) Paul used his letter to assert his apostolic authority and give a careful presentation of the correct doctrine of the gospel of God's free grace. Any misconceptions or confusion in the minds of the Roman believers would be set straight by this letter and the true gospel message would be confirmed in their minds. Romans 3:8 suggests that contrary doctrines had been spread and attributed to Paul. The letter to the Romans would affirm true doctrine.

IV. The Overall Theme of Romans

Romans reveals God's remedy for the depravity of man. Paul establishes that all are sinners, estranged from God, and in danger of judgment. He presents the gospel message by which men may be saved.

- A. The thesis of Romans

The proposition of Paul's argument is stated in Romans 1:16-17. *For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith."*

All mankind are sinners, and thus at enmity with God, under condemnation, and unable to save themselves. In

the riches of His mercy, God sent His own Son, Jesus Christ, to open the way for sinners to have their sin removed and to be reconciled to Himself. Paul shows that righteousness comes from God alone. God justifies guilty, condemned sinners by grace alone through faith in Christ alone.

- B. The major theme of Romans

Romans is a book of doctrine. In chapters 1-11, Paul gives an in-depth presentation of the theological truths of the gospel of God. He methodically presents, explains, and substantiates the doctrines of justification by faith, sanctification, election, and God's divine sovereignty. In chapters 12-16, he expounds the practical application of these doctrines in the lives of believers, setting forth Christian rules of conduct in relation to God, neighbors, government, and fellow Christians. Although there are many doctrinal truths presented throughout the book, the predominant theme of Romans is the righteousness of God.

The prophet Isaiah wrote that *we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags* (Isaiah 64:6). Human beings have no inherent righteousness. There is no way we can make ourselves righteous through anything we may do. God alone can give us righteousness. This He does mercifully, by His grace.

John Murray, in the introduction to his commentary, The Epistle to the Romans, explains the necessity of God-righteousness. He writes that human righteousness is the essence of the religion of this world. But human righteousness is a contradiction to the gospel of God. Only God-righteousness can fulfill the desperateness of our need. Only God-righteousness can make the gospel the power of God unto salvation. God-righteousness comes through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus and the propitiation in His blood.

The Book of Romans reveals the mercy, grace, justice, and majesty of God's righteousness. As you study this book, you will come to see the sovereignty and the grace of God. May your mind and heart be opened and hungry to receive God's word.

- C. Paul's personal experience of God's righteousness

Although Paul does not share his personal history and conversion in his letter to the Romans, it is clear that he had personal experience and understanding of God's righteousness. In Romans 1:1, Paul refers to himself as *an apostle separated to the gospel of God*. He then proclaims the good news of God's grace. Paul explains how God justifies hopelessly depraved sinners by grace through faith. This is the gospel which Paul

embraced and preached. It is the gospel to which he had been separated.

Paul was a man totally separated from the man he had formerly been. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul explained that in the past he had placed his confidence in the flesh. *If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so; circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee;.... concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless* (Philippians 3:4-6). As an orthodox Jew and a loyal Pharisee, he was consumed with zeal for Judaism and the Law. He became fanatical in persecuting the church of Christ (Acts 26:10-11; 1 Timothy 1:13). All he held dear was hostile to the grace and righteousness from God through faith in Christ. But as he wrote in Philippians 3:7-10 *...what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith.*

As he composed his letter to the Roman believers, offering his great defense of the gospel of grace, Paul was well aware of God's grace in his own life. He was a changed man, released from the condemnation of the law. He had died to the law that he might live

to God (Galatians 2:19). "No one knew better and perhaps none comparably the self-complacency of law-righteousness, on the one hand, and the glory of God's righteousness, on the other" (The Epistle to the Romans, John Murray).

Paul intimately understood the grace of God through his own personal experience. His mind and life had been revolutionized through the cross of Christ, God's gracious, merciful, and just means of bringing salvation to degenerate humanity. Paul saw that grace, not law, was the determining factor in salvation. This was true throughout the Old Testament. It was true for Abraham (Romans 4:1-4 and 9-22). It was true for David (Romans 4:5-8). It was true for Israel (Romans 10:1-13). It is true for you (Romans 3:21-25 and 10:12-13). God may deal with people in personal and individual ways, but He always has and always does act by means of grace (Ezra 9:8).

Application

Have you experienced the grace of God in your life? Have you separated yourself from all attempts to achieve your own righteousness? Have you simply trusted in God's righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ? If you are not sure, please ask your discussion leader for a copy of the Disciplers Confidence Letter. Then continue faithfully in this study so you may come to a full and clear understanding of God's gospel of grace.

OUTLINE OF ROMANS

I. Justification Through Faith - Romans 1-5

- A. The Excellence of the Gospel - 1:1 - 17
- B. The Depravity of Mankind - 1:18 - 3:20
 - 1. Unbelievers are slaves to sin - 1:19 - 32
 - 2. Religious moralists are slaves to sin - 2:1-16
 - 3. Jews are slaves to sin - 2:17 - 3:8
 - 4. The whole world is guilty before God - 3:9-20
- C. The Grace of God - 3:21 - 5:21
 - 1. God alone justifies sinners by grace, through faith, in Christ alone - 3:21-31
 - 2. Abraham was justified by faith alone - 4:1-25
 - 3. Believers stand in God's grace, justified by faith - 5:1-21

II. Sanctification By The Holy Spirit - Romans 6-8

- A. Believers are dead to sin and alive to God - 6
- B. Believers still struggle with sin - 7
- C. Believers have assurance of salvation- 8
 - 1. The Spirit has set us free - 8:1-17
 - 2. We have the hope of glory - 8:18-30
 - 3. We are more than conquerors - 8:31-39

III. The Sovereignty of God - Romans 9-11

- A. God's promises do not fail - Romans 9:1-13
- B. God is sovereign over all - Romans 9:14-33
- C. God alone is the source of righteousness - Romans 10
- D. God's providence deals with Israel's problem of unbelief- Romans 11
 - 1. God has always kept a remnant - 11:1-10
 - 2. God will save Israel by His mercy - 11:11-32
 - 3. God's ways are above and beyond human understanding - 11:33-36

IV. The Christian Life - Romans 12-16

- A. Christians are called to be living sacrifices - 12
- B. Christians are to be good citizens - 13
- C. With Christians, love takes precedence over liberty - 14
- D. Christians have Christ as their pattern and motivation -15
- E. Paul recognizes, warns, and blesses Romans believers - 16

QUESTIONS

Questions are based on the New King James Version of the Bible.

Day One: Read lesson notes and references.

1. What did you learn from the lesson notes that was new to you?

2. What did you read in the notes or references which made you eager to study the Book of Romans?

Day Two: Read Romans 1:1-17.

3. What do you learn about Paul, the writer of Romans? Give verses.

4. a. How many times do you find the word *gospel*? Give verses and tell what you learn about the *gospel* in each instance.

- b. What more do you learn about the *gospel* in the following Scripture passages?
Mark 1:14

Galatians 1:11

Ephesians 1:13

Colossians 1:5-6

1 Timothy 1:11

5. Find the word *through* in verses 5 and 8. How do these two passages depict Jesus Christ as our mediator.

Day Three: Read Romans 1:1-7.

6. What do you learn about Jesus Christ in this passage?

7. a. What do you learn about the recipients of this letter?

- b. In what way(s) would you consider yourself to be like the recipients of this letter as described by Paul?

8. a. How many times do you find the word *called* in this passage? In each instance, who was *called* and what do you learn about the calling?

b. What do the following passages teach about being called?

Romans 8:30

2 Thessalonians 2:13-14

2 Timothy 1:8-9

Hebrews 9:15

1 Peter 5:10

9. a. What 2 things (verse 5) had Paul received through Jesus Christ?

b. What more do you learn about grace from the following Scripture passages?

1 Corinthians 15:10

2 Timothy 1:9

Titus 3:7

Day Four: Read Romans 1:8-12.

10. a. For whom did Paul give thanks and why?

b. Use the following Scripture passages to explain why Paul gave thanks through Jesus Christ.

John 14:13

Colossians 3:17

Hebrews 13:15

11. a. What did Paul do without ceasing?

b. Give one reason he did so.

12. a. Why did Paul desire to visit the Roman Christians?

b. How would they be able to find mutual encouragement?

Day Five: Read Romans 1:13-15.

13. a. What had Paul planned to do but had been prevented from doing so far?
- b. What result did he desire when he was able to carry out his plan?
14. a. To whom did Paul consider himself a debtor?
- b. ? (Thought Question) Why do you think he felt this way? See Acts 9:15; 13:2; 26:14-16 and 1 Corinthians 9:16 for help with your answer.
15. What did his obligation make him eager to do?

Day 6: Read Romans 1:16-17.

16. Use the following verses to explain Paul's statement about not being ashamed of the gospel.
Mark 8:38
- 1 Corinthians 1:18
- 1 Corinthians 1:23-25
17. a. What important facts do you learn about the gospel in this passage?
- b. ♥ (Heart Question) Why is any one of these facts particularly meaningful to you?
18. How is Psalm 98:1-2 reflected in Paul's words concerning the gospel here in Romans 1:16-17?
19. a. What Old Testament prophet does Paul quote? What is the quotation?
- b. ? (Thought Question) What do you think this means?
20. What do you learn about faith from the following Scripture passages?
Ephesians 2:8-9
- Hebrews 11:1-3
- 1 Peter 1:5