

## **Romans Study**

### **Introduction & 1:1-17**

Where I grew up there is a national park called the Alibates flint quarry. You could walk through the park without any digging and find ancient flint Indian arrow-heads. You could also find lots of other sorts of interesting rocks just lying around not far from the paths. However, if you did a little digging, you could find the coolest rocks, geodes - they were smooth bulbous rocks that when you broke them open there were crystals of all sorts of colors inside. The book of Romans, like the rest of Scripture, is full of wonders and truth right along the surface. Yet, if you take a little time to dig into a book, a bit deeper, you will be rewarded with a better understanding of what God was saying in the first place. It is possible to just pick up the Bible and read it, understand it, and apply it to your life as everyone who is saved has the Holy Spirit indwelling them - and the Holy Spirit is the ultimate author of the Scriptures. However, if we dig a bit deeper, ask and seek answers to a few questions before we begin studying a certain book of the Bible, it will often help us interpret the more challenging sections of the book and it can help us rule out certain interpretations that don't fit with the historical facts of the book. While Romans is fairly straight forward, there are a few passages where knowing the background to the book will help us get a better picture of what is being taught.

#### **Author**

**[Romans 1:1]** - Paul wrote the letter. Unlike our modern format for letters where we sign our name at the end, in the ancient world, the author of a letter put his name at the beginning of the note.

#### **Recipients**

**[Romans 1:7, 15]** - It was the beloved saints who made up the church at Rome.

#### **Date of Writing and Place of Writing**

These questions require a little detective work to discover. They are important as if we know the date and place where this letter was written, it may uncover clues to why it was written in the first place and help us understand some of the message it contains.

Paul is fairly stingy when it comes to actually divulging historical references that allow us to pin an exact date to a writing - in most cases. However, Luke, who traveled with Paul and wrote Acts, is much freer with these sorts of details. So whenever we seek to understand "when" we need to locate a fixed point in time that we can work forward to or backwards from to get our information.

**[Acts 18:12]** - Who was the Proconsul? *Gallio*. Where was he the Proconsul of? *Achaia* So why does this matter? Achaia is the region where Corinth is located. So we can examine the historical records and know that Gallio was the Proconsul in 51 A.D.

**[Acts 18:18]** - How long did Paul stay in Corinth? Where did he go from Corinth? It says he stayed "many more days" (probably a few months as years were not indicated). From Corinth he went to Cenchrea which was a little port city by Corinth. He would not have stayed there long but rather it was a transit point, an ancient bus station for boats. After Cenchrea, Paul arrived in Ephesus. So by the Spring of 52 A.D. Paul went and stayed at Caesarea and Jerusalem. From there we know Paul went to Antioch and spent the winter there and this would

have been the winter of 52 A.D. [**Acts 20:31**] This would put his return to Ephesus in the Spring of 53 A.D. marking the beginning of a three year ministry in Ephesus.

At the end of this three years, in 56 A.D., the Paul returned to Corinth where he stayed for three months. [**Acts 20:3**] Then Paul began his final trip to Jerusalem in the Spring of 57 A.D. Paul had been taking up a collection for the poor Jewish saints in Jerusalem. When he wrote II Corinthians (8-9), the collection was not yet finished. Yet, when he wrote Romans it appears that it fully collected and he was on his way to deliver it to Jerusalem. [**Romans 15: 25-28**] Thus, it appears that the best date we have for Romans is 57 A.D.

Corinth is the most likely place where this letter was written. [**Romans 16:1-2**] Phoebe was a servant of the church in Cenchrea and she was entrusted to deliver the letter to the Roman church. This is confirmed later in chapter 16. [**Romans 16:23**] Gaius was one of Paul's most notable converts during his missionary trip through Corinth. [**I Corinthians 1:14**] While Phoebe was from Cenchrea, that was merely the little port city next to Corinth. Paul didn't stay in Cenchrea any longer than it took to get his hair cut for his vow and board the ship. Corinth is the most likely place where Paul would have had the time to put together this letter because he would have had the time, network and support in Corinth.

### Occasion/Purpose

Do we know why Paul was inspired to write this letter? No one writes a meaningless letter, especially in ancient times when it required a personal messenger to deliver the letter.

What was Paul's calling from the Lord? [**Romans 1:15**] - He was called to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. He saw the Gentiles as his God-given sphere of ministry and the Roman church, then would have been largely Gentile in nature for him to reach out to them.

When you examine where Paul spent his time planting churches, it wasn't just random places. He chose the most populous cities in the areas where he was traveling. He wanted to plant churches in strategic positions that would impact the most people and spread to the most people as people traveled in and out of those big cities all the time.

Why Rome? Rome was the leading city of the world at that time. It was huge and it was established and the center of the Roman empire. No other city in the ancient world compared to Rome in size or importance. Yet, Rome was not even close to everywhere else Paul traveled - it was west of where he had ever been.

Let's go back to Paul's last long-term ministry which was his three years in Ephesus. Ephesus was by far the most important and largest city in Asia Minor. He had tremendous success in those three years in Ephesus. [**Acts 19:21**] So, Paul is going to pass through Macedonia and Achaia to finish the collection for the poor in Jerusalem and then go and deliver the offering in Jerusalem personally. After that is completed, Paul wants to expand the gospel westward - all the way to Spain. Rome is the logical stopping place between Jerusalem and Spain where he could encourage the believers and help build up the church that was in Rome. His hope was that Rome would become a missionary base in the west, just as Antioch was in the east.

But here's the problem. Paul had never been to Rome and the Christians in Rome did not know him personally. He had been preaching the gospel for twenty years in the eastern section of the Roman empire yet he would be unknown to the Christian in Rome, at least by sight.

Now here's another historical puzzle we need to solve before going any further. Where did the church at Rome come from? There is no mention in Scripture at all of any church

planting efforts happening in Rome ever. Where did the people who made up the church come from and who founded the church at Rome? The truth is no one knows for sure, but we do have a solid clue. **[Acts 2:5-11]** There were Jews and proselytes to the Jewish faith in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost and following. They were part of the 5,000 people who got saved that first day and learned, at least for a time, from the disciples in the original church before heading home. Once in Rome they organized into a primitive church. This church would have been made up of Jews and a handful of Gentiles who were converts to Judaism at Pentecost. Yet, by the time Paul is writing the letter to Romans, the church is primarily Gentile. What happened?

We looked at this in part when we studied Hebrews. The Roman historian Suetonius wrote that in 49 A.D., the Emperor Claudius banished all the Jews from Rome. The Romans were having trouble with the Jews causing large scale public disturbances and riots over Christus. At this point in history (only 16 years after the crucifixion and resurrection of the Lord) the church was still seen by Gentiles as a faction or cult of Judaism. Thus, the Emperor didn't distinguish between Jews and Christians - he just evicted all Jews from Rome to get things to settled down. **[Acts 18:1-2]** (*Once again we see secular history lining up perfectly with Biblical history. God never gets it wrong because He was there.*) With the Jews banished from Rome, all that was left were the Gentile believers at the church in Rome. About a decade after Claudius died and Nero had become Emperor that the ban was lifted and so by mid-late 50's Jews were slowly trickling back into Rome. Since the church was primarily Gentile, Paul saw it as a church under his ministry to the Gentiles.

Now, consider this. You are a Jew who was banished from your home and church in Rome and forced to migrate to another area to live. When you left Rome, your church that you worked hard to grow was largely a Jewish congregation. Now you return nearly a decade later and the church is now largely Gentile with Gentiles running the show. There is a certain culture shock that took place when the Jewish Christians realized how drastically things had changed in their absence.

Q: What are some of the feelings you think that those Jews would have felt upon returning to the church in Rome they founded?

But when you read through the book of Romans, we're going to see that a lot of what Paul wrote is to bridge the gap between the two groups. This is true especially in the early chapters and later on in chapters 9-11. Paul wanted both ethnic groups to know that they were included in God's eternal plan for redemption. When the history of the world will be written in heaven, after all is said and done, it will be seen that God's perfect plan included both Jews and Gentiles getting saved and carrying out God's will on earth. Neither group has any moral superiority to the other.

There is one other historical incident that will help us answer the question why Romans was written or at least gives us another perspective. **[Acts 20: 3]** There was a plot against Paul's life by the Jews. This one was serious enough to cause Paul to change his travel plans. In the end, he had to wonder if he was going to make it to Rome with his life. He needed to make sure that his genuine gospel of grace, with a full explanation, made it to the church at Rome, even if he didn't. Now later, God confirmed that Paul would make it to Rome but it wasn't until after this plot and after he wrote the letter to the church at Rome. **[Acts 23:11]**

So, with this information in hand, we can now answer the question about why Paul wrote

the book. He wanted to minister in Rome and establish a base of missionary operations for the gospel in the west on his way to Spain. He did not know what state these believers would be in after all these years so he is going to write a letter to them that explains the gospel he preaches in detail. Romans contains by far the most comprehensive presentation of the gospel of any book in the Bible. Whether or not Paul made it to Rome safely or not, his letter would make it to help ground and build up the church there.

### **The Opening of the Letter** (Romans 1:1-17)

A. This letter contains the longest opening section of any letter Paul wrote. This is probably because his recipients did not know him personally. Many had probably heard about him and his ministry but Paul wanted to make sure that he was properly identified before proceeding with the rest of the letter. **[Romans 1:1-7]**

Q: . How does Paul introduce himself? How does he describe himself?

1. v.1 - *as a bond-servant of Christ Jesus. This word for servant is often used in the Bible and it is one of the lowest forms of servants, such as a slave. This specific word was often used to denote a person who took up voluntary bonds to another for work. After the time of the bond was up, the person (self-made slave) could decide to remain permanently in the service of the master. Thus they were surrendering their life to serve their master voluntarily and the master would take up the responsibility of providing for the servant.*

2. v.1 - *Paul points to his office and his authority. He is an apostle, a person Jesus Christ personally picked out to represent Him and build up the church.*

3. v. 1 - *Paul also points out that he was set apart for the gospel. At the heart of the entire book of Romans, this is the it. This is the reason and main theme of the book. Paul was set apart by God to proclaim the gospel message and this is what he's doing.*

When you look at v.2 - it says the gospel was promised beforehand. This word "beforehand" means "from antiquity, ancient". In other words, the gospel is not a new idea. The prophecies of the Old Testament point directly to the gospel. It was God's plan for the salvation of mankind all along.

Q: Why do you think this is important for Paul to spell out? *(The Roman church does not know him and he wants to make sure they understand his gospel isn't something new or novel but rather was God's plan from the beginning.)*

Notice that God's Son, Jesus Christ, is the focus of the gospel. He is the good news in person.

Q: What two things did Paul have to say about Jesus in this passage?

1. v.3 - *Jesus was born a descendant of David according to the flesh (he had a human nature, like we do)*

2. v.4 - *Jesus was declared the Son of God (thus, He had a divine nature) and this was proven to the world by His resurrection from the dead. (NOTE: Jesus was always God's Son. However, after His resurrection His identity was validated. The resurrection gave Jesus the*

power to dispense salvation to all who would believe on Him.)

Notice that Paul said he had received grace and apostleship.

Q: What was the purpose for God giving Paul grace and apostleship? (*v.5 - to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of Jesus' name.*)

The phrase “obedience of faith” is ambiguous at best. What Paul is saying is the faith, to be genuine, always has obedience. Obedience, if it is to please God, will always be done in faith. The word for “obedience” here means attentive listening, compliance, and submission. Paul is saying it this way in order to undercut the typical Pharisee formula for saying that it is “faith in the law” that is important. The reason faith is important is that what is done by faith is what is done for the sake of Jesus’ name - it displays the gospel.

Paul then identifies the recipients of the letter - those who have been called of Jesus Christ - those who have accepted the gospel message - and are at Rome. Then he extends to them his typical blessings of grace and peace. In v.7 he calls the believers “saints”. Saints mean “holy ones”. Every believer needs to understand that they are holy. They are not holy based upon their works. They are holy because of Jesus’s finished work on the cross and His resurrection. He imparts that holiness, that separateness, to us. Holy is not only clean but also separate from the world. We are both because of what Christ has done for us.

There are two special notes that we need to make concerning this opening of this letter because they aren’t repeated later.

1. Grace and apostolic calling. Paul saw serving God and His people as an aspect of God’s unmerited favor towards him - in fact to all Christians. When we serve the church, we have no right to do so on our own. We speak, we pray, we minister and we teach all in Jesus’ name. Only because God gives us His grace can we hope that anything worthwhile to the kingdom of God will be accomplished. Also, rather than pride and arrogance, we serve out of brokenness and humility before God. **[II Corinthians 4:7-12]**

Q: Why is it that people cannot serve God without His grace? (*Grace grants us the knowledge and power to accomplish God’s will. Without grace we are purely doing things in our own power and in our own way. This is why we have no room to boast when we are serving God as to our own performance - because it is God doing it through us by His grace.*)

Important side note here: there are no more apostles in the world today. An apostle was a person set aside personally by Jesus Christ. They had to have had first-hand contact with the Lord and be called physically by Him to that office and to exercise that authority.

2. Obedience and faith. Faith and obedience are two sides of the same coin. It is not a two-staged process Paul is describing here. When a person comes to know who God is then that elicits true faith and leads to submission to God. Keep in mind that grace is for more than just salvation. It is for every aspect of the life of a believer after salvation until Jesus returns.

Q: When you think of God, what attributes come to your mind? How do those attributes lead

you to submission to Him and His will?

### **Thanksgiving, Prayer and Purpose of the Letter [Romans 1:8-17]**

A. In this section, Paul gives thanks to God for the Roman church and assures them that he prays for them often. He then transitions to his plans and purposes for the letter. The word “first” means priority - not a placement. He’s not giving a list of things but rather he’s giving them his priority - that they exist as a church body and the gospel is spreading because of them.

Q: Where is the faith of the Roman church being proclaimed? *(v.8 - throughout the whole world)*

Q: Why do you think Paul is saying this to the church? *(It wasn't to give them the big head but rather to inform the church that they were in the capitol of the world and their work for the Lord there was encouraging other churches in hard situations.)*

Q: What is the one thing Paul prays for? *(v.10 - that he may come to them and work among them finally)*

Notice vv. 11-12. Paul wants to impart a spiritual gift to them. He doesn't say spiritual gifts (plural, such as the gifts of the Spirit) but rather a spiritual gift to them - a gift to their spirits which will help establish them more fully. Yet, you cannot take v.11 without the statements in v.12. To keep the Romans from thinking that Paul is boasting in himself - that he or his mere presence is the gift - he states that he wants them to be encouraged together. Paul had heard so much about this church that he wants to come and experience them and build them up and obtain some fruit while among them. He wants to evangelize while there and see some people saved as he does among the other Gentile churches where he ministers.

The word “obligation” (v.14) means a person who owes someone else, a debtor, and in a moral sense a transgressor. Certainly Paul, in his days as Saul, was certainly a transgressor against Jesus. Yet, after preaching for twenty plus years still saw himself a debtor to Christ. Paul does not want to expand his personal “kingdom” among them as much as he feels indebted to all people everywhere to share the gospel with them because of what it's done for him. The words are “Greek and barbarian”. The word “barbarian” isn't what we think of when we use the word. It was used to denote a person who couldn't speak Greek - thus uneducated. It was a way to denote all the Gentiles in the world.

Q: Do you sense an obligation to Christ to share the gospel with others?

Q: What are some barriers that keep you from sharing the gospel more often than you do?

Q: Once a person is saved, is our responsibility to that person complete? *(no, we still need to engage in discipleship, when possible. This is more than likely what Paul was meaning when he said he wanted to impart a gift to them. It was the gift to discipleship.)*

Q: Why was Paul not ashamed of the gospel? *(it is the power to transform human lives)*

Q: Why do you think that Paul said he wasn't ashamed of the gospel? *(let them give answers)*

*Think of it this way, everything else was rubbish when it comes to transforming sinners into saints. Paul was slandered often and persecuted for offering a law-free gospel. Even many of those early Jews who came to know Christ, became Judiazers - those who trusted in Christ for salvation but believed the one needed to continue to uphold the Jewish law in order to maintain one's righteous standing before God. Paul was never ashamed to preach the grace-filled gospel message, free of the Jewish law, because it was from God.*

Q: Why did Paul say to the Jew first and then to the Gentile? What is that about? *(Historically, Paul wanted the Roman church to keep in mind that the gospel came through the Jews. God offered it to them first as they had been His covenant nation under the former covenant (the Old Testament) but now the gospel opened salvation to everyone - including the Gentiles. Remember, what we saw in the opening section on the background of the book - there are Jews returning the church and Paul wants to make sure they are treated fairly and as Christian brothers and not second-class citizens in God's kingdom.)*

Q: Are there any second-class citizens in our congregation? Explain.

Q: What does the phrase "live by faith" mean to you?

The gospel reveals righteousness of God - not self-righteousness that the law brings or obeying rules brings but rather the righteousness that God gives those who put their faith in Him. The phrase "faith to faith" means we start out with some faith that saves us but we end up showing more faith that empowers us to live out God's will righteously. If you do a study of the word "righteousness" in the Old Testament, you will find it is a synonym for the word "salvation" in the New Testament. **[Genesis 15:4-6]** (Is. 50 is another example). We believe what God says instead of what the world or our flesh says and God imparts His righteousness to us.

In these last two verses (vv. 16-17) Paul describes one of the greatest of all Biblical doctrines: justification by faith. It means that a person can stand justified before God based upon showing faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. This is trusting that what God said who Jesus was and what Jesus did, He actually did and that it has impact for each person who trusts Christ.

Q: What are some of the objections to "justification by faith" that you have heard?

Q: What can we do to make "justification by faith" a belief others will be open to embrace?

Again, we see that the main theme of the book of Romans is the gospel of grace. That will help guide us as we seek to interpret it.

Q: Are there any questions, comments, rebukes or rebuttals?

Next week: **Romans 1:18-32**