

Introduction to Romans

(Sermon One)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Author

Paul is the author of this letter to the Roman Church. His Roman name was Saul of Tarsus. Paul was a Pharisee an apostle and pioneer missionary of the church. Paul comprised more than half of the books contained in the New Testament. God used the Roman citizenship of Paul to reach many countries. And now we get to read about Paul's efforts to ground the Roman church in sound doctrine and encourage them in fruitful ministry.

Citizenship is a valuable possession. Think about the multitudes that poured through Ellis Island, and the thousands since, yearning to be Americans. Many of you have not too distant relatives who migrated to America. They take great pride in becoming citizens of this land of opportunity. Our citizenship is a part of our identity, signifying who we are and where we belong. So also, people longed to become Roman citizens. The Roman Empire was vast, wealthy and filled with national pride.

Paul was born a Roman citizen. However, Paul was also a Jew. In fact he identified himself closely with the culture and religion of the Jewish people. We know little of his early years. Paul first appears on the scene in the pages of scripture at the confrontation with Stephen (Acts 7:58). We see Paul as a young Pharisee, zealous for the faith giving his approval to Stephen's death. In Acts 22 we learn that Gamaliel, the most respected rabbi of the day, had trained Paul. Paul was so Jewish, in fact, that he became obsessed with eliminating the young Christian sect that he viewed as heretical (Acts 8:1-3, 9:1-2).

In Acts 22 we learn about Paul's Roman connection. Paul was Jewish, but he was also a Roman citizen. The mighty Roman empire extended well beyond Italy, through Macedonia and Asia, all the way to the limits of Judea. Although all who lived in the conquered territory were under Roman control, not everyone was a Roman citizen. That was a special privilege. A person could become a Roman citizen by birth or by purchase. And with Roman citizenship came certain rights and guarantees (for example, the right to a fair trial and the right of passage).

Because of his Roman citizenship we read in Acts 22 that Paul was spared a beating. Later Paul used his Roman citizenship again in Acts 25, this time to get to Rome. As a citizen he had the right to appeal his way through the legal system and that is what he did in order to preach the gospel message to leaders in the Roman Empire.

Paul had dual citizenship and that gave him access to the non-Jews in the Roman Empire as well as inroads into the Jewish community. But Paul actually had citizenship in three kingdoms. In his letter to the church in Philippi, Paul writes:

Philippians 3:20-21 Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Setting

This letter to the Roman church was written from Corinth in A.D. 57. This is a few years into the rule of Nero. During Paul's ministry in Corinth, he met Aquila and Priscilla, Jews who left Rome following an order by the Emperor Claudius (Acts 18:2). While in Corinth, Paul stayed and worked

with Aquila and Priscilla. Later, this godly couple returned to Rome and became leaders in the church there (Romans 16:3-5).

Although Paul had never been to Rome, he longed to go there (Romans 1:9-13). He was planning to visit the church on his way to Spain.

Audience and Cultural Factors

Rome was the capital city of the vast and mighty Roman Empire, an empire that stretched from Britain to Arabia. Truly, all roads led to Rome. It would be natural, then, for Paul to want to visit this great city, not merely as a dutiful citizen or a curious tourist, but as a gifted evangelist who wanted to reach the world for Christ.

Rome was the largest city in the world with a population of about 1 million people. It was the diplomatic and financial center of the world much like Washington D.C. and New York City put together.

There was a Jewish colony in Rome dating to the second century B.C. Cicero wrote that the Jews of Rome were a large, powerful, and influential group. Some of the Christians in the Roman church were converted Jews from the colony.

What was it like to be a Christian in Rome? It was like being an oppressed minority. Rome was consumed with financial and political concerns. But Rome was also a very religious city. Its pagan religion centered around Jupiter and other gods and included many superstitions. Rome incorporated many of the idols from the lands they conquered.

To the Roman citizens, the highest allegiance was to the state. But for Christians, God took priority. To Roman citizens, non-Romans were inferior and enslaving conquered people was the accepted way of life.

At first, Christianity was tolerated in Rome, as a sect of Judaism. But in the last few years of Emperor Nero's reign he authorized hunting down,

torturing, and killing Christians. In A.D. 64, a fire, thought by many to have been ordered by the emperor himself, destroyed a large part of Rome. Nero, however, accused the Christians in the city, giving him the excuse for any number of terrible atrocities. Here is what a secular historian of that day wrote: Speaking of Christians in Rome;

Their death was made a matter of sport; they were covered in wild beast's skins and torn to pieces by dogs; or were fastened to crosses and set on fire in order to serve as torches by night...Nero had offered his gardens for the spectacle and gave an exhibition in his circus, mingling with the crowd in the guise of a charioteer or mounted on his chariot.

Those who traveled to Jerusalem and witnessed the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and other places where the gospel was preached probably started the Christian Church in Rome.

Occasion and Purpose for Writing

The main purpose for Paul writing this letter was to prepare the way for his visit to Rome. He knew that the Roman Church could be helpful in spreading the gospel to the world.

He also wrote this letter to counter misunderstanding of his goals and his message. Paul took the time to write this carefully constructed letter to build his credibility as an apostle. He carefully wrote an extensive treatise of his theology.

Yet another purpose of Paul's writing was to solidify the Romans in their faith, since they had no apostolic leaders or teachers. This church did not have a whole Bible. Churches in other parts of the world had copies of much of the New Testament. But the Roman Church had only the Old Testament. This was the first book of the bible they would receive.

Therefore Paul wrote very extensively about justification through faith and many other cornerstone themes of Christianity.

Message

Among the subjects covered by Paul were Sin, Salvation, Spiritual growth, Sovereignty, and Service.

Sin (1:18-3:20)

Before giving the good news, Paul gives the bad news. The whole human race stands condemned as sinners deserving God's wrath and punishment. In presenting this truth, Paul makes his case like a skillful lawyer, beginning with references to humankind in a general and to the obvious sinners in the world.

But then Paul moves to the other extreme, focusing on the Jews who were so careful to avoid sin by observing the law. He explains that even those who are religious stand condemned. Paul hits everybody in the church so there would be no factions or finger pointing.

The final conclusion is that "there is no one righteous, not even one...There is no one who does good, not even one" (3:10,12).

Sin means refusing to do God's will and failing to do all that God wants. Our nature is to disobey him. Our sin cuts us off from God. Sin causes us to want to live our own way rather than God's way. Because God is morally perfect, just, and fair, he is right when he condemns sin. All human beings are sinners. All human beings are "guilty! – deserving the death penalty.

Salvation (3:21 – 5:21)

The Romans had a smorgasbord of gods and religious beliefs from which to choose. It would be easy to be confused about spiritual truth and eventually assume that one religion must be as good as another. Paul's clear

answer is No! The only thing that we all have in common is condemnation for our sins; we all stand guilty before God.

But that bad news sets the stage for the Good News. Paul explains the rest of the story – that salvation is available from God. This salvation comes through faith in Christ, and Christ alone. It is not a reward for being good, observing the law, or being religious.

3:22 “There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

Although we don’t deserve it, God, in his kindness, reached out to love and forgive us. He provides the way for us to be saved. Christ’s death paid the penalty for our sin.

Just like the day this was written, it is not always popular to say that there is one way to heaven. But our message is not narrow-minded. It is good news. Thank God he provided a way to be saved!

Spiritual Growth (6:1 – 8:17)

Paul uses the illustration of slavery that all Roman Citizens would understand. Slavery was a vital part of Roman life. Paul’s message was that Christians don’t have to be slaves to sinful desires. Instead they are free to obey God, to be his slaves instead, to do what he wants.

Because we are free from sin’s control, the law’s demands, and fear of God’s punishment, we can grow in our relationship with Christ. By trusting in the Holy Spirit and allowing him to help us, we can overcome sin and temptation. ***8:1-2 “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.”***

Sovereignty (8:18 – 11:36)

One word that would epitomize the Roman government is power. The mighty Roman Empire seemed to stretch forever, and its armies seemed invincible. Those who lived in Rome were continually reminded of Rome's power. There were generals parading through the streets to celebrate their victories, thousands of men and women from conquered lands serving as slaves, and emperors demanding to be worshipped. Into this atmosphere Paul sends the message of God's sovereignty.

This is a crucial truth for the Roman Christians to understand and believe; for it is at this point that the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Rome will come into great conflict. Soon under Nero's persecution believers will have to choose between allegiance to Rome and allegiance to Christ. Understanding and believing the sovereignty of God will make that choice much easier.

According to Paul, God is working all things for good. His sovereign purpose in all that we are experiencing is to make us like Christ. And no matter what happens, we are more than conquerors in Christ and can never be lost to his love.

Service (12:1 – 15:13)

Paul's final theme is service; serving God and the other members of the body of Christ, the church. Paul explains how believers should relate in society, to government (13:1-7) and to neighbors. Paul also tells how they should relate to their brothers and sisters in Christ – encouraging Christians to use their spiritual gifts (12:3-8) and helping weaker members (14:1-15:13).

If men and women truly honor Christ as Lord, it will show in their lives and they will be known for their love, in the community and the church.

OUTLINE OF ROMANS

A. WHAT TO BELIEVE (1:1-11:36)

1. Sinfulness of mankind
2. Forgiveness of sin through Christ
3. Freedom from sin's grasp
4. Israel's past, present, and future

B. HOW TO BEHAVE (12:1 – 16:27)

1. Personal responsibility
2. Personal notes

PASSAGES TO MEMORIZE

Romans 1:16-17

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, *“BUT THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.”*

Romans 3:23-24

...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus

Romans 5:8

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 6:22-23

But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:1

Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death.

Romans 8:28

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestine to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; And these whom He predestined, he also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?

Romans 10:9

...that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved..

Romans 12:1

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12:6

Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly.

Romans 12:21

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 15:1

Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.