

Study 1: Introduction to the book of Romans

What do you know about the church at Rome?

Date and occasion of the letter

What was Paul's association with the church?

What are the major themes of the book?

Brief outline of the Letter

Homework and preparation for next week:

- Read chapter 1, 2 and 3 in a single sitting.
- Read the notes as a review of the study.

Notes for study 1: Introduction to the book of Romans

What do you know about the church at Rome?

We know that Rome was the greatest city in the world at that time, and as the headquarters of the Roman Empire, all roads led to Rome. The city would have had a population of well over a million people (including women, children and slaves).

As in most parts of the Empire, the Jewish population was present and active. When Paul finally arrived in Rome, one of the first things that he did was call together “...*the leaders of the Jews...*” (Acts 28:17). There were “*many*” of them who came back to Paul’s lodgings to learn further the things that he had to say. So, we can learn that the Jews were quite extensive in number in Rome – for their leaders appear to be “*many*”. Further, they were remote and isolated from the influence of the Jews in Jerusalem – for those in Jerusalem had not written or communicated anything about Paul to those in Rome, nor did they come to present their prosecution of Paul within the two year Statute of Limitation period.

Whilst these events happened some time after Paul wrote the Roman letter, they do give us some quite interesting insights into the society and culture of Rome.

Jerusalem was an outpost to the Roman Empire. It was a place that those in Rome would rather not have to deal with. The Jews in Rome were in the metropolis of the most important city in the world. Whilst Jerusalem was important religiously, the Sadducees who were very politically active would have regarded Rome as great importance, being the politically important centre of the Empire – far more than that of the remote outpost of the Empire in Jerusalem.

The picture of the Jews that is painted in Acts 28 is one of initial curiosity concerning Paul. Like many other places where Paul went, he gathered initial interest in what he had to say, but not too long after that he had rejection. In some places he was met with great enthusiasm (Berea, Ephesus). The reception in Rome was not that great “...*some were persuaded by what Paul said and some disbelieved...*” (Acts 28:24).

But many of those in Rome were not Jews. The letter clearly addresses both Jews ***and*** Gentiles. Such is after all, what you would expect to find at the centre of the Empire.

The city of Rome was filled with many religious buildings. In a single year 28 BC, Augustus claimed that he restored 28 Temples.¹

Date and occasion of the letter

The letter bears much similarity to the Galatian letter, and was probably written about the same time. It was written after the Corinthian letters, since Paul talks about the collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem in all three (Rom 15:25-26; 1 Cor 16:2; 2 Cor 8:19). But in the Corinthian letters, Paul is instructing them to prepare the collection so that he can take it to Jerusalem – he is still in the preparation stage. However in the Roman letter, Paul’s travel plans are well established. He is about to leave for Jerusalem.

This places the time as Paul’s third journey, and quite late in the journey – just before he is about to depart to go back to Syria and Judea. Paul spent three months in Greece at that time (Acts 20:3) working with the church in Corinth. (For a discussion on this, refer to my notes on Acts: Study 29 – Chapter 20).

Further, Paul commends Phoebe to them, who was a servant of the church at Cenchrea – a port city for Corinth. Phoebe must have been making a trip to Rome, and Paul used the occasion of her

¹ The New Lion Handbook to the Bible, Lion Publishing plc, Oxford UK; ISBN 0 7459 3870 1; p 684

trip to send the letter, along with his personal commendation of her (16:1). Paul also sends greetings from Gaius (16:23) who was looking after Paul. Gaius was baptised in Corinth (1 Cor 1:14), but that does not mean that it was the same Gaius, or that he had not moved. And then there is Erastus the city's director of Public Works (NIV) or Treasurer (NKJV) – whichever, he is in a prominent position in the city's administration. It is probably the same Erastus that had ministered to Paul, and whom he sent to accompany Timothy to Macedonia (Acts 19:22).

Based on all of the collective (but mostly circumstantial) evidence, the letter was written from Corinth, during the third journey, just before Paul left to go back to Syria. This places the time at early in the year AD 58, as Paul wanted to be back in Jerusalem by Pentecost of that year.

The letter appears to have been written because Paul had hoped on several occasions to come to Rome, but had not been able to. He was now heading in the opposite direction (back to Syria / Judea), and so it was obvious that he would not be able to come on this particular journey. Phoebe was (apparently) going to Rome, and so that prompted Paul to send the letter to them with her.

Judaisers had been troubling the churches everywhere, and it was only a matter of time before they began to trouble the church at Rome also. So, Paul writes the letter – not to deal with specific issues as he had had to do in other places (Galatia and Corinth for example), but as a letter of encouragement and of forewarning. It was to help them to be instructed in the faith.

What was Paul's association with the church?

Paul had not yet visited the church at Rome (1:11), although a visit had long been his desire (15:22 -23), and was still on his plans (15:24). What is particularly interesting about the Roman letter is the association with the brethren that Paul has already established.

There are around 70 (I'm sure someone who has counted them will correct me on this) named people in the New Testament. There are 37 named (including a couple of unnamed but specific) people mentioned in the Roman letter – almost ½ of the named people in the New Testament are those that Paul knew in Rome, or were with Paul and known to the brethren in Rome. But remember, Paul has not been there yet!

Paul later did go to Rome – about 3 years later, and was to spend two years there under house arrest. He was then released and went on another missionary journey, only to return to Rome as a prisoner where he was put to death by beheading (See my study notes Life of Paul, Study 6).

The Roman letter is therefore very different than the Galatian letter. Paul had visited the brethren in Galatia on 4 occasions before he wrote the letter. They knew him well, and he knew them well. Consequently he was able to respond quite specifically to the problems (Judaisers entering the church and demanding that the Gentiles obey the Law of Moses) that had arisen amongst the Galatian churches. Paul had lots of rapport with them. In contrast, although Paul knew many of the brethren, he did not have the same rapport with the Romans.

It is worth noting that Paul not only knew many of the brethren in Rome –he must have met them whilst they were travelling to places where he had been – but he also knew *where they were*. He knew those who had moved from Ephesus back to Rome (Aquila and Priscilla for example). It is wonderful to think about the communication that was going on in the churches at that time, with all of the logistical communication difficulties.

What are the major themes of the book?

The clear theme and message of the book is portrayed by Paul in 1:16 – The gospel is the Power of God to salvation to everyone who believed – whether Jews or Greeks.

We can learn the things that Paul has in mind, by looking at the introduction and the conclusion to the letter. The introduction is in 1:1-12, and the conclusion in 16:17-27.

As an exercise, circle or highlight the key thoughts from the introduction, and also those from the conclusion, and then link them together. Make a list – with special attention to those that appear in both places. [Quotation from NIV].

RO 1:1 Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God-- ² the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures ³ regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, ⁴ and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. ⁵ Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. ⁶ And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

RO 1:7 To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. ⁹ God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you ¹⁰ in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you. ¹¹ I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong-- ¹² that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. ¹³ I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.

RO 16:17 I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. ¹⁸ For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people. ¹⁹ Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I am full of joy over you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil.

RO 16:20 The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you. ²¹ Timothy, my fellow worker, sends his greetings to you, as do Lucius, Jason and Sosipater, my relatives. ²² I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord. ²³ Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings. Erastus, who is the city's director of public works, and our brother Quartus send you their greetings. ²⁵ Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, ²⁶ but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him-- ²⁷ to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

Brief outline of the Letter²

In the first three chapters, Paul argues five propositions:

1. All have sinned before God,
2. The Law identifies God's standards – and hence sin, but Law is not a remedy itself,
3. Having sinned, we must have Grace – and that is expressed in Jesus Christ,
4. Grace is available to all, if we fully trust in Jesus,
5. “All” includes Gentiles as well as Jews.

Chapter 4 – Abraham is used as an example of the kind of faith that brings God's grace – an obedient faith. Law is contrasted with faith, works with Grace, and debt with promise, with respect to the justification of sinners.

Chapter 5 – A two part summation of the previous arguments. The second part is a series of dramatic comparisons between Adam and Christ. Each shows the overwhelming superiority of God's grace to sin and its consequences. What Adam introduced, Christ countered – and always victoriously.

Chapter 6, 7, & 8, address the implications of the new life in Christ. (6) We have crucified our sinful past, and now live unto God. (7) Law identifies sin but is not responsible for sin – being holy and just. But our fleshly bodies are in a war against sin, and we need further forgiveness. (8) Exhortation and encouragement to serve God with the heart, mind, and spirit. God knows our hearts and will not reject the faithful.

Chapters 9, 10, & 11, relate the gospel to the Jews. (9) they were highly favoured in the past, but they now charge God with forgetting His promise and being unfair. Since the Gentiles are now also God's people, God is merciful to both Jews and Gentiles, and is able to work His will like a potter moulds clay. (10) Israel rejected God's plan, and have sought to attain righteousness by keeping the Law. Despite the warnings from Moses, they still continue to be a “*disobedient and gainsaying people*”. (11) Paul balances the gloomy outlook with Messianic hope. A remnant will be saved by “*the election of Grace*”. Even their crucifying of “*the Seed*” of Abraham provided the promised blessings for all nations. The Jews are like a tree – some branches can be pruned off, and new branches (the Gentiles) can be grafted in.

Chapter 12, 13, & 14 provide practical examples of the application of the Law of Christ in the lives of the saints. (12) We must present our bodies as a living sacrifice – not *conformed* to the world but *transformed* by renewed minds. We need to use our talents to serve God, with loving consideration for one another. (13) We must subject ourselves to civil authorities and pay our taxes – because God has ordained the civil governments, and sanctions the punishment of evil doers. Above all, we must love our neighbours as ourselves. (14) There are differences between many brethren. We must consider the weaker brethren, with their consciences as well as our own. We must give account of ourselves to God, and have patience with one another – because that is what Christ has done with us.

Chapter 15 – Christ is a minister of both the Jews and the Gentiles. He has fulfilled the promises made to the Fathers, and has blessed “*all nations*”. As His minister, Paul has made great personal sacrifices. He wants to come to visit Rome, but must first go to Jerusalem.

Chapter 16 – Commendations, salutation, and greetings.

² Adapted from Turner, Robert F. “Reading Romans” Florida College Bookstore, Temple Terrace FL, pp 7–10.