

The Book of Romans – Lesson 1

Introduction and Romans 1:1-13

58 AD

Among the New Testament epistles, Paul's Epistle to the Romans is usually considered the most important epistle from a theological standpoint. Its importance was recognized as early as the fourth century AD when, in the organization of the New Testament epistles, it was placed first among the epistles despite the fact that, chronologically, it was the fifth.¹ In the 16th century Martin Luther took his understanding of Romans as the early basis of the Protestant Reformation and wrote a major commentary on Romans. His example was followed by nearly every major Christian theologian of the Reformation. I have found that the ninth chapter of Romans has often been used as the major foundation of a widely held theological doctrine that has always troubled me and has often divided the Church. I am speaking of the doctrines of election and predestination as they were espoused by St. Augustine, John Calvin, and Martin Luther. It is a doctrine which seems contrary to all that I have read in the Bible about the nature of God, and all that I have experienced and observed. Yet, I have found many good men, who generally seem to base their theology on the Bible, who hold to this doctrine. For me, this was a compelling reason to make a careful examination of Romans and particularly Romans 9. On a cursory reading of the English translations, I had to admit that if you just took fragments of Romans 9 and divorced them from the rest of Paul's letter, you could make an argument which seemed to support Calvin's view of predestination and election. However, I have found that if you incorporate everything that Paul said in Romans on the subject with what he said in the rest of his epistles you will come up with an altogether different view of predestination and election. Besides that, I couldn't help observing that, if Paul was really teaching what Calvin thought he was teaching, it was a groundbreaking and revolutionary idea. If that was what he intended to teach, it seems strange that Paul would drop such a revolutionary idea into the middle of Romans without any better introduction. I discovered that the best solution to solve the interpretation of Romans 9 was to study it in the context of the whole book. In my studies I have found that there is nothing so deadly to the correct understanding of Scripture (or any communication) than to separate a passage from its context.

Besides clearing up predestination, a thorough study of Romans also deals with another major problem. Sometimes Romans had been used as a basis for depreciating the laws of moral behavior in the Law of Moses to the point of ignoring them altogether and justifying personal sin. That is not at all justified by Romans.

Paul's Epistle to the Romans also clears away the misbegotten idea that somehow, before the Cross, God dealt with the human race through a system of works. A

1 After 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 2 Thessalonians, and 1 Corinthians.

thorough study of Romans clears up the New Testament view of the place of the Mosaic Law in the Age of the Church.

Introduction to Romans

Paul wrote his Epistle to the Romans in 58 AD from Corinth in Greece. The place and date of the writing of Paul's epistle to the Romans can be established as follows.

The place of writing - Corinth:

Paul was staying in the house of Gaius according to Romans 16:23. A man named Gaius was one of the prominent believers from Corinth according to 1 Corinthians 1:14. According to Romans 16:23 a man named Erastus was a prominent citizen of the town where Paul wrote Romans from. A man named Erastus later stayed in Corinth as if staying at home when Paul left Corinth for the final time according to 2 Timothy 4:20. The evident bearer of Paul's letter to the Romans was Phoebe from Cenchrea (Romans 16:1). Cenchrea was the seaport of Corinth (Acts 18:18). Just these facts substantially establish Corinth as Paul's location when he wrote Romans.

The time the epistle was written is partially established by determining that Romans was written during Paul's second visit to Corinth:

We know that Paul had not yet been to Rome when he wrote Romans (Romans 1:9-13), and since Paul only made two visits to Corinth before his first visit to Rome, this must be one of those two. At the time of the writing of Romans, Priscilla and Aquila were living in Rome (Romans 16:3). At the time of Paul's first visit to Corinth Priscilla and Aquila were living in Corinth (Acts 18:2, 18). According to Romans, Paul had just been through Macedonia and Achaia (Romans 15:26) and was on his way to Jerusalem (Romans 15:25). According to the account in Acts of Paul's second visit to Corinth, he first visited Macedonia, then Achaia (Corinth was the capital of the province of Achaia), then travelled to Jerusalem (Acts 19:21). This established that Romans was written during Paul's second visit to Corinth described in Acts 20:2-3.

The time is further established by the known date of the end of Felix's governorship of Judea:

Paul sailed from Corinth to Jerusalem within a month or two of the writing of this letter since he only stayed in Greece three months altogether (Acts 20:3). The beginning of sailing season was March 1 and Paul arrived in Jerusalem in time for Pentecost in May (Acts 20:16). After Paul reached Jerusalem, he was arrested within a week to ten days and taken to Caesarea. There he was in prison for two years under the Roman Governor Felix (Acts 24:27). Since we know from historical sources that Festus replaced Felix in 60 AD, the simple subtraction of the two years that Paul was in

confinement in the Governor's palace in Caesarea, tells us that he wrote Romans during his three month visit to Corinth from January to March 58 AD.

In the chronology of the Church, 58 AD was 28 years after the death of Christ (30 AD), and 12 years before the destruction of Jerusalem (70 AD). Shortly after Paul wrote this letter, he took ship for Jerusalem in the desperate belief that he (who was the Apostle to the Gentiles) was uniquely qualified to confront his own people (the Jews) with the Gospel. He was almost killed, and never was given a chance to speak his message to the Jews. Instead, he was arrested, and hustled away under heavy guard by night to Caesarea. There he was kept in confinement in the Governor's Palace by Felix, the Roman Governor of Judea, for two years without a trial. During the inquest into Paul's case by the next Governor, Festus, he appealed to Caesar. He was then shipped to Rome, where he spent another two years under house arrest before being tried and acquitted by the Emperor Nero. Ironically, during Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea, though he never got to speak to the Jews, he got to speak to nearly every important Gentile in that part of the world.

The Epistle to the Romans was different from Paul's other epistles in an important respect that changed the way in which it was written. Except for the Epistle to the Hebrews, 2 all of Paul's other epistles were written to churches which he had helped to found and were made up mainly of Gentiles. Those other epistles were also addressed only to believers. When Paul wrote Romans, he had never been to Rome. Not having a clear picture of who would hear his letter read, he seemed to have imagined them as being both Jews and Gentiles, believers and unbelievers. As a result, Paul wrote the letter to all four kinds of people. To further understand Romans in the context of some of the concerns with which Paul would have been preoccupied, one must remember that since 30 AD and Christ's crucifixion, God in His forbearance had withheld wrath on the Jews for the rejection of their Messiah. The Old Testament and Christ's teaching were full of prophecies that God's judgment would come on the Jews because of their rejection of their Messiah. I have copied some of them below.

Old Testament Prophecies of the Destruction of Jerusalem

Psalms 40:14-15 "May all who seek to take my (*the Messiah's*) life be put to shame and confusion; may all who desire my ruin be turned back in disgrace. May those who say to me, "Aha! Aha!" be appalled at their own shame (*the destruction of their Temple and city*)."

Psalms 55:15 "Let death take my (*the Messiah's*) enemies by surprise; let them go down alive to the grave, for evil finds lodging among them." (*Josephus records that the*

2 Although some contend that the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews was someone other than Paul, I am firmly convinced that Paul was the author. The Epistle to the Hebrews was addressed to the Jews. For further explanation, see my commentary on Hebrews.

High Priest Annas who had led the drive to have Jesus crucified and many of the other Jewish leaders went into underground vaults where they were caught and slain by the Zealots).

Psalms 69:22-25 “May the table set before them (*those who would kill the Messiah*) become a snare; may it become retribution and a trap. May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever. Pour out your wrath on them; let your fierce anger overtake them. May their place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in their tents.”

Psalms 140:11 “Let slanderers not be established in the land; may disaster hunt down men of violence (*those who would kill the Messiah*).”

Psalms 141:5-7 “Let a righteous man strike me (*the Messiah*)--it is a kindness; let him rebuke me--it is oil on my head. My head will not refuse it. Yet my prayer is ever against the deeds of evildoers; their rulers will be thrown down from the cliffs, and the wicked will learn that my words were well spoken. [They will say,] “As one plows and breaks up the earth, so our bones have been scattered at the mouth of the grave.” (*Josephus records that the two chief surviving high priests were cast away without burial during the last year of the Jewish revolution*)

Isaiah 9:13-19 “But the people have not returned to him (*the Messiah*) who struck them, nor have they sought the LORD Almighty. So the LORD will cut off from Israel both head and tail, both palm branch and reed in a single day; the elders and prominent men are the head, the prophets who teach lies are the tail. Those who guide this people mislead them, and those who are guided are led astray. Therefore the Lord will take no pleasure in the young men, nor will he pity the fatherless and widows, for everyone is ungodly and wicked, every mouth speaks vileness. Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised. Surely wickedness burns like a fire; it consumes briars and thorns, it sets the forest thickets ablaze, so that it rolls upward in a column of smoke. By the wrath of the LORD Almighty the land will be scorched, and the people will be fuel for the fire; no one will spare his brother.”

Jesus’ own Prophecies of the Upcoming Destruction of Jerusalem

Mark 12:7-9 “But the tenants (*the Jews*) said to one another, ‘This (*Jesus*) is the heir. Come, let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ So they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. ‘What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.’”

Luke 11:50-51 “Therefore this generation (*of Jews*) will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all.”

Luke 19:42-44 “As he (*Jesus*) approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, ‘If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace--

but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you.” Also see Matthew 22:7.

There had even been a prophecy in Ezekiel 4 that pinpointed the beginning of the Roman siege of Jerusalem on Passover in 70 AD to the day. It had said the siege would begin exactly 40 years after the death of Jesus Christ which occurred on Passover in 30 AD:

Ezekiel 4:6-7 “After you have finished this, lie down again, this time on your right side, and bear the sin of the house of Judah (*killing their Messiah*). I have assigned you 40 days, a day for each year. Turn your face toward the siege of Jerusalem and with bared arm prophesy against her.”

In God's providence, the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus recorded that the exact day that the siege began was on Passover.³ Roman history tells us that Passover was in 70 AD, the year after Titus' father Vespasian became Emperor. In other words, the siege was raised exactly 40 years to the day after Jesus was crucified on Passover in 30 AD.

So, there is no doubt that Paul, writing in 58 AD, knew that God's period of grace before the coming judgment upon Israel was beginning to run out. Immediately after writing the epistle to the Romans, Paul undertook his ill-fated trip to Jerusalem. Paul was warned not to go, but Paul was so overcome with his compassion for his fellow countrymen that he persisted (Romans 9:1).

Another critical point in understanding Romans is a true comprehension of the term “the Law.” As it appears in scripture, the term “the Law” must be defined by its context.

“The Law” could be used to refer to:

1. The Law of Moses as revealed in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy which included:

3 Wars of the Jews, Book V, Chapter 13, Paragraph 7 “Manneus, the son of Lazarus, came running to Titus at this very time, and told him that there had been carried out through that one gate, which was entrusted to his care, no fewer than a hundred and fifteen thousand eight hundred and eighty dead bodies, in the interval between the fourteenth day of the month Xanthieus, [Nisan,] when the Romans pitched their camp by the city, and the first day of the month Panemus [Tamuz].”

The fourteen day of Nisan is Passover.

- a. Personal moral standards for each individual.
- b. Tabernacle worship regulations.
- c. The Social, Political and Economic code for the administration of the nation of Israel.

2. The revelation of God from other books. In Romans 3:19, Paul quoted verses from Isaiah and Psalms and called them “the Law.” So, the term “the Law” could refer to the personal moral standards which were contained in the larger Law.

3. The Jewish distortions of the Law which were based on man-made traditions (Mark 7:5-13).

Both of the first two of the above categories of the Law were fulfilled by Jesus Christ. He fulfilled the moral code. He also fulfilled the typology of all the worship regulations. Besides that, He fulfilled the typology of the history of Israel, and He fulfilled the direct prophecies of the Greater Law (the other Scriptures). He was the culmination, fulfillment, and end of the Law. He replaced the moral code of the Law with a higher law, which was to walk as Christ Himself walked. He replaced the typology of worship in the Temple and Tabernacle with the reality of worship “in Him.”

With this introduction, I can begin my verse-by-verse commentary on Romans.

Romans 1

Romans 1:1 Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—

Paul declared his identity, mission, and authority. Although Paul had never been to Rome,⁴ it is certain that many of those to whom he was writing were not only familiar with Paul but knew him personally. Paul had helped establish the Church in Antioch some thirteen years earlier. Antioch was the second city in the Roman Empire and the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. Soldiers and functionaries of the Empire as well as Jewish merchants and traders would naturally travel back and forth quite frequently between the two cities. We know that Paul’s old friends Priscilla and Aquila had relocated back to Rome at this time as well as several of Paul’s Christian relatives from Tarsus. We also know that the wife and son of Simon of Cyrene had moved to Rome from Antioch where they had been great friends of Paul. Simon was the one who had been forced to carry the cross of Jesus after He had collapsed. We also know from historical records that Sergius Paulus, the Proconsul of Cyprus that Paul had led to the Lord (Acts 13:6-12) now held an important position in Rome as director of public works.

Romans 1:2-4 ~~the gospel~~ which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a

4 Romans along with Colossians were the only two books written to places Paul had never been.

descendant of David, 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.

First and foremost, in his introduction Paul established the important doctrine that Jesus was both truly God and truly man in one person. He also established that his Gospel was of great import and relevance to the Jews. The Gospel was the fulfillment of the promise of the LORD that David's greater son would come. This promise had been made through their prophets and their scriptures. It is in these early verses that we can begin to understand the "predestination" that is often misunderstood in Paul's epistles. Paul was establishing that it is Jesus Christ who was predestined ("promised beforehand") before the beginning of the world to be God's answer to all He had promised. The miraculous birth and atoning death of Jesus on the Cross had always been a first principal (a predestined principal) in God's plan. It was not an afterthought which was thrown in after Adam fell, or after the Jews failed.

It becomes apparent in these verses that an important part of Paul's audience was the Jews of Rome! Although he didn't know them personally, he had met Jews just like them throughout his ministry and he knew how they thought. They were pretty much like the same Jews Paul spoke to when he finally arrived in Rome as a prisoner about three years later:

Acts 28:16-28 "When we got to Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him. Three days later he called together the leaders of the Jews. --- They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. From morning till evening, he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: 'The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers when he said through Isaiah the prophet: 'Go to this people and say, 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.' For this people's heart has become callused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.' 'Therefore, I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!'"

Romans 1:5 **By whom we received grace and the sending forth 5 to all nations for the**

5 Literally, the word ἀποστολή {ä-po-sto-lā} means "the sending forth." This commission was first recorded in Matthew 28:19 "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations." Paul recorded his own personal commission from Jesus Christ in Acts 26:16-18 "Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."

obedience 6 to the faith for the sake of his name. RST

Although the sense of the NIV translation is pretty accurate,⁷ I think the literal translation from the Greek is more useful. Notice that the verb “we received” is in the first person plural, not the first-person singular. Paul was talking about the whole church (we) that received grace and were sent forth to the nations. The “faith” to which “we” were to be obedient referred not to the act of faith, but to the content of what Jesus Christ revealed to us, the Word of God.

In this verse, the Gentile part of Paul’s audience also came into view. They were “the nations”! Incidentally, people of almost all the nations in the world could have been found in Rome at that time.

Romans 1:6-7 **And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. To all in Rome who are loved by God and called (κλητός) 8 to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.**

Notice that the calling here was the calling to the obedience of the faith. Paul was appointed to call people. The concept of calling is used throughout this epistle. In this verse Paul was calling people, which meant he was inviting them to obedience, not compelling them! Never in any way does calling compromise the concept of free will. It rather enforces it! Was this epistle addressed just to believers? No! Of all Paul’s letters, this is the only one to a group that is not addressed “to the church of God in Corinth”, “to the churches in Galatia”, “to the saints in Ephesus”, “to the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse”, “to the church of the Thessalonians.” The address of Romans says, “to all who are loved by God and called to be saints.” We know that God loves the whole world, therefore, the whole world is called. Furthermore, Paul addressed arguments throughout Romans to people who were clearly unbelievers, most often unbelieving Jews. Therefore, clearly unbelievers were among those to whom this letter is addressed and were therefore among those who were called.

Romans 1:8 **First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world.**

Paul was clearly speaking here to those believers from among those Romans who would hear or read his epistle. This also confirms that the body of Christ in Rome was growing and even thriving long before Paul or Peter got to Rome. This is contrary to some later fables that had Peter founding the Roman church.

6 Literally, in the Greek the word is ὑπακούω {hü-p-ä-kü'-ō} which is a compound of ὑπό {hü-po'} which means “under” and ἀκούω {ä-kü'-ō} which means “to hear.” Taken together, the concept is not just to hear but “to obey”, or “to hearken.”

7 The NIV is “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.”

8 κλητός - 1) called, invited (to a banquet) 1b) called to (the discharge of) some office: Strong’s Lexicon

Romans 1:9-10 **God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you 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.**

I think that it is safe to say that Paul never imagined that his actual travel itinerary to Rome, which was laid out by the LORD, would involve over 2 years confinement in the Roman Governor's palace in Caesarea followed by a harrowing sea voyage and a shipwreck. However, by just such means God prepared Paul for his ministry in Rome.

Romans 1:11-12 **I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong-- that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.**

Here Paul was stating what he later wrote to the Hebrew Christians:

Hebrews 10:25 "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Our responsibility as members of the body of Christ is to share our gifts with each other, so that we can all grow. Paul's gift was teaching, and he could encourage them that way. However, they could also encourage him by their response to the faith that they were learning.

Romans 1:13 **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.**

Paul was aware that both Jews and Gentiles would read or hear this letter. Though Paul was the Apostle to the Gentiles, Acts repeatedly recorded that he went to the Jews first when he went into a new area. He would first speak in the local synagogue if there was one. There he would always also find many Gentiles who had been exposed to the teaching of the Old Testament. It seems probable that Paul first started planning to go to Rome when he started teaching the Romans who were stationed in Antioch in 45 AD. Many of them had returned to Rome by this time thirteen years later.