

THE LETTER TO THE ROMANS

Background to the Letter

Of all the letters of Paul, the one to Romans is the longest and most complex as it is theological throughout, expounding the gospel of God's righteousness that saves all who believe (Romans 1:16-17). The letter to the Romans is the deepest exposition of Paul's theology of grace and justification by faith. The apostle wrote this Letter most likely from Corinth, between A.D. 56 and 58 (cf Acts 20:2-3).

Context

Paul at that time was about to leave for Jerusalem with a collection of funds for the Christian believers there, taken up from his Gentile congregations (Romans 15:25-27). He planned then to travel on to Rome and to enlist support there for a mission to Spain (Romans 15:24, 28). Such a journey had long been on his mind (Romans 1:9-13; 15:23).

Now, with much missionary preaching successfully accomplished in the East (Romans 15:19), he sought new opportunities in the West (Romans 15:20-21), in order to complete the divine plan of evangelization in the Roman world. Yet he recognized that the visit to Jerusalem would be hazardous (Romans 15:30-32), and we know from Acts that Paul was arrested there and came to Rome only in chains, as a prisoner (Acts 21-28, especially Acts 21:30-33 and Acts 28:14, 30-31).

The Church in Rome

The Christian community in Rome seems to have been founded around the 40's, probably by Jewish Christians. That the church in Rome was composed prevalently by Jewish Christians is proved by the fact that riots took place in the Jewish quarter of Rome. The Roman historian Suetonius mentions an edict of the Emperor Claudius about A.D. 49 ordering the expulsion of Jews from Rome in connection with a certain "Chrestus," probably involving a dispute in the Jewish community over Jesus as the Messiah ("Christus").

According to Acts 18:2, Aquila and Priscilla were among those driven out; from them, in Corinth, Paul may have learned about the situations of the church in Rome.

Opinions vary as to whether Jewish or Gentile Christians predominated in the house churches (cf Romans 16:5) in Rome at the time Paul wrote. Perhaps already by then Gentile Christians were in the majority. Paul speaks in Romans of both Jews and Gentiles (Romans 3:9, 29). The issues were similar to the problems that Paul had faced in Corinth (1 Cor 8).

Purpose

The main purpose of the epistle to the Romans is given by Paul in Romans 1:1, where he reveals that he is set apart by God for the purpose of preaching the Gospel. He wishes to impart to the Roman readers a gift of encouragement and assurance in all that God has freely given them (see Romans 1:11-12; 1 Corinthians 2:12).

The purposes of the apostle's letter is also articulated in the second half of chapter 15:

1. Paul asks for prayers for his upcoming journey to Jerusalem; he hopes that the offering collected from the Gentile churches will be accepted there.
2. Paul is planning to travel to Rome from Jerusalem and spend some time there before moving on to Spain; he hopes the Roman church will support his mission to Spain.
3. Since Paul has never been to Rome, he outlines his gospel so that his teaching will not be confused by that of "false teachers".
4. Paul is aware that there is some conflict between Gentile and Jewish Christians in the Roman church, and he addressed those concerns (chapters thirteen and the first half of fourteen). While the Roman church was presumably founded by Jewish Christians, the exile of Jews from Rome in AD 49 by Claudius resulted in Gentile Christians taking leadership positions.

Place of Romans in Paul's Life

In any case, Paul writes to introduce himself and his message to the Christians at Rome, seeking to get their support for the proposed mission to Spain. For ten years before writing the letter, Paul had travelled round the territories bordering the Aegean Sea evangelizing. Churches had been planted in the Roman provinces. Paul, considering his plan complete, was looking for a new place where to

preach the gospel. The choice of Spain would allow Paul to visit Rome, an ambition of his for a long time, particularly considering that Paul was a Roman citizen but had never visited the city of Rome. The letter to the Romans, in part, prepares them and gives reasons for his visit.

In addition to Paul's geographic location, his religious views are important.

Firstly Paul was a Jew with a Pharisaic background, integral to his identity. His concern for his people is one part of the dialogue and runs throughout the letter.

Secondly, the other side of the dialogue is Paul's conversion and calling to follow Christ. The resulting missionary activity dominated the later years of Paul's life. The letter therefore interweaves the concerns of Paul the Pharisee and the follower of Christ.

Thirdly Paul's missionary work caused opposition from Jews and fellow Jewish Christians. One issue was whether Jewish Christians should continue to carry out laws placed on the covenant people regarding things such as food laws. The disagreement was partly between Paul and the Jerusalem Church. Paul's upcoming visit to Jerusalem to deliver a collection from the gentiles would therefore help maintain the unity of the Christian movement. The letter to the Romans written during this time includes Paul's hopes and fears regarding his visit to Jerusalem and the relationship between Gentiles and more traditional Jewish Christians.

Theme of the Letter

Therefore the message of Paul (see Romans 16:25) finds its centre in salvation and justification through faith in Christ (Romans 1:16-17). While God's wrath is revealed against all sin and wickedness of Gentile and Jew alike (Romans 1:18-3:20), God's power to save by divine righteous or justifying action in Christ is also revealed (Romans 1:16-17; 3:21-5:21). The consequences and implications for those who believe are set forth (Romans 6:1-8:39), as are results for those in Israel (Rom 9-11) who, to Paul's great sorrow (Romans 9:1-5), disbelieve. The apostle's hope is that, just as rejection of the gospel by some in Israel has led to a ministry of salvation for non-Jews, so one day, in God's mercy, "all Israel" will be saved (Romans 11:11-15, 25-29, 30-32).

Some scholars underlined the main theme around the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, a topic judged to be much in the minds of the Roman Christians. Each of these religious faiths claimed to be the way of salvation based upon a covenant between God and a people chosen and made the beneficiary of divine gifts. But Christianity regarded itself as the prophetic development and fulfilment of the faith of the Old Testament, declaring that the preparatory Mosaic covenant must now give way to the new and more perfect covenant in Jesus Christ.

Paul himself had been the implacable advocate of freedom of Gentiles from the laws of the Mosaic covenant and, especially in Galatia, had refused to allow attempts to impose them on Gentile converts to the gospel. He had witnessed the personal hostilities that developed between the adherents of the two faiths and had written his strongly worded Letter to the Galatians against those Jewish Christians who were seeking to persuade Gentile Christians to adopt the religious practices of Judaism. For him, the purity of the religious understanding of Jesus as the source of salvation would be seriously impaired if Gentile Christians were obligated to amalgamate the two religious faiths.

Still others find the theme of Israel and the Church as expressed in Romans 9 -11 to be the heart of Romans. Then the implication of Paul's exposition of justification by faith rather than by means of law is that the divine plan of salvation works itself out on a broad theological plane to include the whole of humanity (Rom 4; 5) and on to the future revelation at Christ's parousia (Romans 8:18-25). Its outlook is universal.

Paul's Letter to the Romans is a powerful exposition of the doctrine of the supremacy of Christ and of faith in Christ as the source of salvation. It is an implicit plea to the Christians at Rome, and to all Christians, to hold fast to that faith. They are to resist any pressure put on them to accept a doctrine of salvation through works of the law (see the note on Romans 10:4). At the same time they are not to exaggerate Christian freedom as an abdication of responsibility for others (Romans 12:1-2) or as a repudiation of God's law and will (see the notes on Romans 3:9-26; 3:31; 7:7-12, 13-25).

Main Structure of the Letter

1. Address (Romans 1:1-15)
 2. Humanity Lost without the Gospel (Romans 1:16-3:20)
 3. Justification through Faith in Christ (Romans 3:21-5:21)
 4. Justification and the Christian Life (Romans 6:1-8:39)
 5. Jews and Gentiles in God's Plan (Romans 9:1-11:36)
 6. The Duties of Christians (Romans 12:1-15:13)
 7. Conclusion (Romans 15:14-16:27)
-

Paul in his own words

LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, how will he not also give us everything else along with him?

Who will bring a charge against God's chosen ones? It is God who acquits us.

Who will condemn?

It is Christ (Jesus) who died, rather, was raised,
who also is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress,
or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword?

As it is written: "For your sake we are being slain all the day;
we are looked upon as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels,
nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things,
nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature
will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Rm 8:32-39

Rm 5:1-2