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GETTING OUR BEARINGS

“BUCKLE UP!”

Buckle your seat-belts and get ready for the biblical “ride of your life”! Today we begin to explore together the epistle to the Romans, one of the greatest books of the Bible.

Consider this magnificent epistle, which has been called “the most profound and comprehensive book in the Bible” (Michael Middendorf). Romans is listed first among the New Testament epistles, not simply because it is the longest (over 7,000 words!) but because it is widely regarded as the chief among them.

The influence of Romans can be read in the lives shaped by its powerful good news. Saint Augustine’s conversion to Christianity began with his reading of Romans 13:13–14. Martin Luther called Romans a “brilliant light” and “the soul’s daily bread” which “can never be read too often or studied too much” (*Preface to Romans*). This letter was the source for Luther’s re-discovery of the Gospel which powered the Reformation. It has, accordingly, always had a strong connection with and influence upon the history of the Lutheran Church.

Not just Lutherans, of course! This book played a key role, for example, in John Wesley’s “warming.” In the year 1738, Wesley attended a Moravian meeting at Aldersgate Chapel in London. On hearing someone reading Luther’s Preface to Romans, he said, “I felt my heart strangely warmed... I did trust Christ, in Christ alone for salvation.” So was kindled the fire that led to the establishment of the Methodist movement.

Early in the twentieth century, a pastor in Switzerland named Karl Barth explored this letter as he searched for something to preach to his congregation. What he found in Romans did more than provide sermon texts. It shaped him in a way that led to Barth becoming a prophetic spokesman for the Confessing Church in Germany in its opposition to Adolf Hitler.

THE FIVE “W’S”

Before plunging in to the body of the letter, let’s address some basic questions. Theologians call these “isagogics.” The rest of us call them “the five W’s.” Who wrote it and to whom? Where was it written? When was it written? Why did the author write? What is the heart of its message?

WHO wrote it? As with most letters in that day, the writer signs his name, not at the end, but at the beginning. “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God” (1:1). Most of us know this man and the dramatic story of his transformation. He went from proud Pharisee Saul, the sworn enemy of Jesus Christ, to Paul, a man who here describes himself as a “servant” of Christ Jesus, arguably the greatest missionary for Jesus and the Gospel who ever lived. No voice from the early church was ever raised against his authorship. Even now, few dispute it.

Strangely, we ought to acknowledge something many will find surprising: Paul did not actually write this letter! The person who did says so in 16:22: “I, Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord.” Tertius, it turns out, was Paul’s “secretary” or scribe, who wrote while Paul dictated. A scribe with the skill of writing neatly and compactly could conserve space on the (expensive) scroll. It may also be that Paul’s physical condition (his “thorn in the flesh” in 2 Cor. 12:7 – an eye problem?) made writing difficult and necessitated a helper.

To WHOM was it written? “To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints” (1:7). Most scholars believe the congregation at Rome

was predominantly Gentile. Jews, however, likely constituted a substantial minority. Paul’s mention of Abraham as “our forefather according to the flesh” (4:1) implies that there were Jews among his readers. More telling is that Paul devotes significant space to the ultimate fate of the Jews (Chapters 9–11) and to issues that arose between Gentiles and Jews (Chapters 14–15).

WHERE was Paul when he wrote Romans? He was most likely at Corinth on his third mission journey. He indicates that his work is almost finished and that “Macedonia and Achaia” have already made their contributions to the offering he was gathering for the relief of the church in Jerusalem (15:25–28). A strong piece of evidence for Corinth is the mention of Phoebe (16:1), a deaconess at Cenchræe, Corinth’s eastern port, who may have been the bearer of this letter to Rome. Two other names, Erastus and Gaius (16:23), probably have Corinthian connections. Erastus was a prominent citizen whose name is mentioned in a Latin inscription found in 1929 in Corinth. Gaius is likely the same man listed in 1 Cor. 1:14 as one of those few Paul baptized at Corinth.

The WHERE information probably also answers the WHEN question. Paul’s third mission journey, which concluded with his bringing of that offering to Jerusalem, is traditionally dated AD 53–57, more than twenty years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. This letter would be from the latter years of that journey, as Paul finalized his work.

The most difficult of the “five W’s” is the why question. WHY did Paul undertake the writing of this massive and highly systematic epistle?

We are quite certain that Paul had not yet visited Rome. He says as much in 1:10–13 and adds that he has “been prevented” from coming but is “eager” to meet them and preach to them. At the very least, then, this epistle would serve as an introduction to his hoped-for personal ministry there. Since they have not met him in person, this letter serves to establish

his credibility, explain his teaching for them, and seek their approval. Further, he is not hesitant to reveal to them his plan to make a further journey to Spain. The wording in 15:24 (“to be helped on my journey there”) implies his request for their financial support in that endeavor. Nothing shy about Paul!

Some commentators assert that there is another reason for this letter. They say that Paul is responding to information he has received about the church in Rome, in particular, that he knows there is some friction between the Jewish and Gentile believers. He is making an appeal to them to welcome one another and avoid quarrels (14:1) and to live in harmony (15:5–7). Thus, he “pastors” them even before he meets them.

There remains one last, obvious “W” – WHAT is the shape and content of this letter? Many writers have taken a stab at drawing up an outline for this immensely rich and systematic epistle. Let’s take a look at one such outline provided by the Concordia Self-Study Bible, a book available and in use in many Lutheran churches. The outline focuses on a key word in Romans, the word “righteousness.” An abbreviated outline is as follows (CSSB p. 1716):

- I Introduction (1:1–15)
- II Theme: Righteousness from God (1:16–17)
- III The Unrighteousness of All Mankind (1:18–3:20)
- IV Righteousness Imputed – Justification (3:21–5:21)
- V Righteousness Imparted – Sanctification (6:1–8:39)
- VI Righteousness Vindicated: the Problem of the Rejection of Israel (Chapters 9–11)
- VII Righteousness Practiced (12:1–15:13)
- VIII Conclusion (15:14–33)
- IX Commendation and Greetings (Chapter 16)

While there is no single, authoritative outline, having

a look at this one or some other can begin to alert the student to things that other students have noticed as they made their journey through Romans earlier. It’s like talking to someone who has lived or traveled where you are about to vacation. They have ideas on what to look for, and you may find their observations a help as you undertake the same adventure.

SOME EXPLANATIONS AND A CHALLENGE

An adventure this certainly will be! Not merely mind-filling, we hope, but life-changing and faith-deepening as well. The investment of your best effort will yield dividends during this study and in the years thereafter.

Unless otherwise specified, the text for our study together will be the ESV. Personal application questions will propel you into the text of Romans and other scriptural citations as you prepare for the coming lesson. They will also challenge you to think about your faith and life as you meet the world week by week. There will normally be a dozen or more questions for each lesson. That will provide plenty to think about.

Speaking of challenges, here’s one from Dr. Martin Luther himself. Read the following quote, and ponder what Luther urges:

This epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament and the very purest Gospel, and is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but occupy himself with it every day, as bread for the soul. (LW 35:365)

Luther is thinking large, urging us to know the ENTIRE epistle, “word for word, by heart”! Most of us would dismiss this out of hand as a Mt. Everest-sized task. Instead of tackling that enormous mountain, how about a foothill or two? Want to take on a chapter? Or at least a few verses? To that end, I will place before you a single verse from each chapter that would be a place to start. Sure, it’s optional. But it could prove to be a personal treasure for you or someone you love. You’re never too old to do this. I’m convinced you’ll find a blessing in it!

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ROMANS 1:1-17

Lord God, who caused all Holy Scripture to be written for our instruction, grant us grace to read and understand it that we experience Your saving power and find our joy in it! In Jesus' name. Amen.

For Review:

1. What are two new things you have already learned about the epistle to the Romans?

Romans 1:1-7

2. Paul's first word of self-description is "servant" (the Greek word *doulos* literally means "slave"). What might be a reason Paul chooses to use that word first?

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3. Three times in these verses, Paul uses the word "called." The last two uses apply to the readers (verses 6-7). To what are they (and we) "called"?

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4. A striking phrase in 1:5 is "the obedience of faith." How does Paul mean obedience and faith to be related? On which word do you personally place more emphasis?

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5. What is meant by "saints" (verse 7)? Who are they? Even some of us who have long been Christians are not accustomed to calling ourselves "saints." What, if anything, makes you hesitant to use that word about yourself?

Romans 1:8-15

6. How many times does Paul use first-person pronouns ("I" and "my" and "mine") in this section? _____

How many times does he use second-person plural pronouns ("You" and "your")? _____

What's the reason for that? _____

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7. List some lessons a pastor could learn from these verses about the conduct of his ministry.

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8. Which of the verses in this section implies that the readers are primarily Gentiles?

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9. Paul says he hopes for a "harvest." The Greek word literally means "fruit." What do you think he means?
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Romans 1:16-17

10. Paul uses the word “gospel” in verse 16. He has already used it in verses 1 and 15. In 25 words or fewer, write what the word “Gospel” means to you.

11. He says that the Gospel “is the power of God.” What other sources of power is the church today tempted to substitute for the Gospel?

12. When I think of being “saved,” I think chiefly in terms of being saved from:

- a) A guilty conscience
- b) The dangers of a hostile world
- c) The fear of death
- d) The wrath of God
- e) Or?

13. Paul says that salvation comes “to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” Why this order?

14. How would you define “righteousness”? (Check its usage in Jer. 23:6; Matt. 6:1; Rom. 4:3; 2 Cor. 5:21)

15. Paul loves to cite the Old Testament for his readers. What Scripture is he citing in verse 17? Read the verse in its original context there.

16. What will you take away from this lesson?

Finally, a suggested verse for memorizing, if you accept the challenge:

Romans 1:16a *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...*