

The Epistles to the Romans

By Andrew B. Spurgeon

PRELIMINARIES

Romans stands first among the New Testament letters because of its length—there are nearly 7,110 words in Greek, which is longer than any epistles in the New Testament. But its distinction is in its clear and comprehensive explanation of the salvation message.

The Author

Paul claims he wrote this letter (1:1). But he used a secretary to write the letter, “Tertius” (16:22). Most likely, Paul dictated Romans word-for-word, Tertius used short-hand to take notes from Paul, wrote a rough copy on a wax tablet, received Paul’s initial approval of what he wrote. Then he wrote the epistle slowly on a papyrus, since writing on fragile papyri could not be hurried, brought it to Paul for proofreading and final approval and adding personal greetings, and when Paul authorized the letter, dispatched it to the Roman Christians.

The Occasion for the Letter

Romans 15:23–29 tells of the circumstances in which Paul wrote Romans. His work in Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia Minor—where he went on his second and third missionary journeys—was coming to an end (cf. Acts 19:10; Rom 15:19). He wanted to expand his ministry westward to Spain, but prior commitments prevented an immediate visit (15:25–26).

But an occasion arose for him to send the Roman Christians a letter: Phoebe from Cenchreae was visiting Rome (16:1–2). Cenchreae was the port city near Corinth where Paul was spending the winter and Phoebe was a beloved saint and a servant (deaconess?). She was visiting Rome and needed a recommendation letter so that the Christians would receive her (Rom 16:1–2). So Phoebe became the bearer of this letter.

The Date

Paul would have written this letter to the Romans between AD 54 and 58. Most likely it was formalized during his three-month stay in Greece but written and sent from Corinth in AD 56–57.

The Addressees

Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in Rome (Rom 1:7, 15). Paul himself was a free citizen of Rome but had never been there (Rom 1:13). Yet he was well acquainted with the Christians from that city. Aquila and Priscilla were Roman citizens who had been expelled from Rome by Emperor Claudius because of their Jewish heritage. They relocated to Corinth and continued their tent-making trade. That was when Paul first visited Corinth (Acts 18:1). Aquila and Priscilla took him into their home and shared their trade with him (Acts 18:2–3). They would also have shared with Paul the faith and growth of the Christians in Rome. The long list in chapter sixteen indicates that Paul had many friends and family in that city.

The Formation of the Church in Rome

When and how the churches in Rome came into existence is mysterious. Paul did not establish that church (Rom 15:20). It is unlikely the apostle Peter did either, because Peter's presence in Rome on such an early date would be questionable and because Paul did not mention him in the letter. There were Jews and "God-fearers" (Gentiles who believed in YHWH God without converting to Judaism by being circumcised) from Rome in Jerusalem at the time of Pentecost (Acts 2:10). Some could have been among the three thousand who accepted Christ that day (2:41). Paul's description of Andronicus and *Iounian* as being "in Christ before I was" (Rom 16:7), suggests they might have been some of the early Christian visitors from Rome. Rufus (16:13) is most likely the same Rufus mentioned in Mark 15:21, the son of Simon of Cyrene who carried the cross with Christ. These Christians, along with families like Aquila and Priscilla, would have started the early church in Rome (Rom 16:5). This confirms what a fourth-century church father, Ambrosias, wrote: "[the Romans] have embraced the faith of Christ, albeit according to the Jewish rite, without seeing any sign of mighty works or any of the apostles."

The People in the Roman Church

The church in Rome had both Jewish and Gentile Christians. Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:2), Andronicus and *Iounian*, Herodion, Rufus and his mother (16:7, 11, 13), and many whom Paul referred to as "my kinsmen" were Jewish Christians. Narcissus, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis, Ampliatus, Urbanus, and Stachys, as their names imply, were Gentile Christians.

It seems that the Roman church had a good balance of Jewish and Gentile Christians. His rhetorical questions— "Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too" (3:29)—imply that he was addressing both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

The political changes in Rome necessitated such a balanced attitude. When the Jews were expelled from Rome, the Gentile Christians took prominence in the church and their homes became the place of worship. Claudius' decree would have possibly forced them to distance themselves from the Jewish roots of Christianity, and possibly, even distancing themselves from the Jewish Christians. So Paul vehemently attacked this mindset in this epistle by stressing the Jewish roots to the Christian faith: "to the Jews *first* and to the Gentiles" he repeatedly asserted (1:16; 2:9–10; cf. 3:2; 9:1–4). The lessons within the letter address their equality—both were equally sinful, equally given the righteousness of God, and equally recipients of God's grace.

The Purpose

Why was Romans written? What was Paul's purpose in writing Romans? Scholars have proposed various theories.

First, the traditional view says Paul wrote Romans as a collection of doctrines that the churches needed, "a compendium of Christian doctrines" (Philip Melancton). Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Wesley held this view.

Second, some see that Paul wrote Romans to quench the smoldering problem between the "weak" and the "strong" Christians in Rome (chapters 14–15). Stott held this view. According to this theory, the "weak" referred to the Jewish Christians who had strong food regulations and observances of special days, whereas, the "strong" referred to the Gentile Christians who were at liberty to eat all food, including meat, and did not observe any special days. Paul's purpose was to admonish the two factions to live at peace.

Third, some argue that Paul was answering questions that Jewish Christians might have had, such as Israel's role in salvation-history or the function of the Torah and circumcision. Romans, therefore, was a dialogue with the Jews to affirm that God had not failed them. Moo and Morris hold this view.

Fourth, some suggest that Paul wrote this letter to prepare the Roman Christians for his ministry westward to Spain. His base in Antioch had been convenient for his ministry in Judea, Syria, Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia. But as he envisioned a ministry to Spain, he needed to shift his base to Rome and solicit funding from the Romans. Kümmel held this view.

Fifth, Schreiner suggests "the glory of God" was Paul's ultimate goal in writing and presenting this gospel to the Romans. There is merit to his theory for the word "glory" is used in strategic places: the accusation against sinners was that they did not give God glory (1:23; 2:7), God gives glory to those who seek it (2:10), all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory (3:23), Abraham's strengthened faith enabled him to give glory to God (4:20), through Jesus Christ the believers have access to God and they rejoice in God's glory (5:2), Christ was raised from the dead for God's glory (6:4), when believers share in suffering for Christ they also share in his glory (8:17), their present sufferings are not comparable to the future glory (8:18), divine glory belongs to Israel (9:4), even objects of wrath are prepared to demonstrate God's glory (9:23), to God alone belongs all glory (11:36), Paul glories in Christ Jesus as he serves God (15:17), and to the wise God alone belongs glory forever through Jesus Christ (16:27).

It is possible to think Paul had several purposes in mind when he composed Romans. Cranfield made this argument. Phoebe's travels to Rome and his changed ministry strategy (an eye towards Spain) set up the context or occasion for him to write to his friends and family in Rome—both Jewish and Gentile Christians. He thought of them as equals in this endeavor. The letter would primarily emphasize the gospel and its implications: how sinful people were saved by faith and through grace because of the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, which resulted in freedom from sin and law. It would explain the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and God's election. It would explain Paul's commission to spread the gospel worldwide and express an invitation for them to partner with him. It would remind them of all the teachings they had received. It would explain that Christian faith resulted in changed life: loving without hypocrisy, obeying governments, and accepting one another as Christ accepted them. Basically, it was a letter to *remind* them of their blessedness in Christ (Rom 15:20). One of the earliest writings, Muratorian Canon (AD 200), said it beautifully in its introduction to Romans: "To the Romans Paul wrote at great length concerning the plan of the Scriptures, showing at the same time that their foundation is Christ."

Outline

There are six principles taught in this epistle. First, both Jews and Gentiles are equal recipients of the grace of God through the gospel of Jesus Christ (Rom 1:16–17). Second, prior to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles were equally sinful and in need of salvation (1:18–3:20). Third, the righteous Judge equally justifies both Jews and Gentiles because of their faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (3:21–5:21). Fourth, as people who are saved by grace alone, both Jews and Gentiles are freed from the slavery of sin and an inability to keep the law; instead, they are enabled by the Holy Spirit to live an active Christian life (6:1–8:29). Fifth, both Jews and Gentiles are shown mercy by God's election (9:1–11:36). Sixth, since they both are saved equally by the righteousness of God, they are required to live a transformed, renewed life (12:1–2), exemplified in unity, obedience, and acceptance (12:3–15:13).

I. INTRODUCTION (1:1–15)

It was customary in antiquity to write a letter with introductory remarks such as the name of the writer and the people whom the writer was addressing, and include a blessing on the readers. In the same way, Paul begins his letter with a reference to him as the author (1:1–5), a statement about his addressees, (1:6–7a), and pronounces a blessing on them (1:7b).

The author (1:1–5)

Paul could have simply introduced himself as “Paul.” Instead, he qualifies his name with three titles, “slave of Christ Jesus,” “called to be an apostle,” and “the one set part for the gospel of God.”

“Paul” (1:1) would have been his legal middle name registered according to the Roman law. Prior to his first missionary journey, he went by his first name, “Saul” (Acts 7:58; 8:1–3; 9:1–27; 11:25–30; 12:25; 13:1–7), a name that reflected his tribe and the first king, Saul, from that tribe—Benjamin (Phil 3:5). But when he started on his missionary journeys, where he primarily gained acceptance among the Gentiles, he chose to use his middle name, “Paul” (a Roman name), in order to diminish his ethnical distinction and to promote his mission to the nations (Rom 11:13; Gal 2:7–8). His Roman name, Paul, would have been less offensive to the Gentiles than his Jewish name, Saul. Friends like Aquila and Priscilla from Rome, whom he addressed, would have known him simply as “Paul,” and as such he begins the letter with that familiar *missionary* name.

Paul, then, refers to his three distinctive roles. First, he is “a servant of Christ Jesus” (1:1). This word, “servant,” comes from the Greek word *doulos* that had a secular and a sacred meaning. In the secular world, it referred to a bond-slave who was bought with a price and owed by a master. Such slaves often formed the lowest class in the society. It is unlikely that Paul meant such a connotation since he is giving authoritative commands in this letter that his readers would ignore if they came from a lowly slave. In the sacred world the word *doulos* meant, “a servant of a deity,” someone who represented and spoke for a god. That was how the Old Testament presented authoritative figures, such as priests and kings. Moses (Josh 14:7; 2 Kgs 18:12), Joshua (Josh 24:29), David (1 Sam 17:32; Ps 89:3), Elijah (2 Kgs 10:10), Jonah (Jon 1:9), Nehemiah (Neh 1:6), and the Messiah (Ezek 34:23) were all referred to as “servants of the Lord.” Paul too is a “servant of a deity,” who is Christ Jesus.

Who is Christ Jesus? “Christ” was the Greek translation of the Hebrew title “Messiah,” a well-known and anticipated king of the Old Testament. Paul and other apostles claimed that Jesus was that Messiah (Acts 9:22; 15:26; 17:3; 18:5, 28; 28:31). The name “Jesus” meant he would redeem his people: “She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Matt 1:21). True to his name, Jesus became both the Messiah and the redeemer of the people.

Secondly, Paul is “called to be an apostle” (Rom 1:1). The term “call” refers to a divine invitation to an action of obedience: God *called* Abraham to leave his father’s land and go where he instructed him, and Abraham obeyed (Gen 12:1–3); God *called* Moses to deliver his people out of Egypt, and Moses obeyed (Exod 3:7–10); and God *called* Jeremiah (Jer 1:4–5), Amos (Amos 7:15) and Isaiah (Isa 6:8), who all obeyed. Similarly, Paul was *called* to be an apostle, and he obeyed. An apostle was a witness to Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection (cf. Acts 1:21–22). A few were chosen for that task (Mark 3:14; Acts 1:22–26). Although Paul was not

one of Jesus' original twelve disciples, he too was called to such a ministry by the special revelation of Jesus Christ (Acts 9:1–9; Gal 1:16; 1 Cor 15:8). He saw his apostleship equal to that of the Twelve (2 Cor 11:5; 12:11) and was mystified by his apostleship for he had persecuted the church (1 Cor 15:8–9). He bore the signs of an apostle (2 Cor 12:12) and was commissioned to be an apostle to the Gentiles (Rom 11:13; Gal 2:7–9).

Thirdly, Paul is “set apart for the gospel of God” (Rom 1:1). The word for “set apart” refers to choosing something and setting it aside from the rest, just as when the people of Israel brought sacrifices to God and *set apart* the thighs and breasts for the priests (Lev 10:15; cf. 20:26). Similarly Paul was *set apart*, handpicked and appointed for a particular task.

The gospel of God (1:1–5)

The “gospel” is significant to Paul and in Romans he defines it three times: Rom 1:1–5, 1:16–17, and 10:2–13. All three together form a complete picture of the gospel.

First definition of the gospel

The gospel has three unique features (Rom 1:1–5). Foremost, the gospel originates from God (1:1). In antiquity, “good news” was associated with a king announcing the birth of his first-born or declaring victory over an enemy. Similarly, Paul’s gospel originates with God the King.

Secondly, this gospel is “promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures” (1:2). Paul’s gospel isn’t new or innovative; it is what the prophets predicted. Paul’s words echo what Luke says, “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:27).

Thirdly, the gospel is “regarding his Son” (1:3). The title “Son,” with reference to Jesus, occurs in various ways: “Son of Mary,” “Son of Joseph,” “Son of David,” “Son of Man,” “Son of God,” and simply “the Son.” Each of these titles has significance. Paul here in Romans 1:1–4 refers to two titles: “Son of David” and “Son of God.” The title “Son of David,” is a reference to his physical lineage: “as to his human nature he was a descendant of David” (1:3). God appointed David as king over Israel with a covenant: “I will raise up your descendant, one of your own sons, to succeed you, and I will establish his kingdom” (2 Sam 7:12–14a). Because of that covenant, the Jews expected their king to have Davidic lineage. Even when David’s descendants were no longer ruling the people (that is, from the Babylonian captivity until Herod’s rule), they were hoping for such a descendant of David to come and rule them. Matthew and Luke affirm Jesus’ Davidic lineage at the outset (Matt 1:1–16; Luke 3:23–38) and so do several individuals (Matt 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30–31; 21:9, 15; 22:42).

Paul explains that Jesus is also “the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead” (1:4a). The term “Son of God” is synonymous with the king of Israel (John 1:49). Paul is explaining that death could not terminate Jesus’ kingship; his resurrection from the dead established his continued kingship as the “Son of God.” The Davidic King who died is alive! He is to rule forever as the Son of God. What seemed like an end to his rule was reestablished and he was declared the Son of God. The Holy Spirit orchestrated this resurrection “with power.”

This Davidic Son of God has a name: “Jesus Christ our Lord” (1:4b). As explained earlier (1:1–5), the name “Jesus” means he would save his people, and the name “Christ” means he is the anointed king of the people. But by calling Jesus “Lord” (*kurios*), Paul equates him with YHWH God and Caesar Augustus. The Jews knew that the Greek Old Testament translated all the references to YHWH as *kurios* (LORD). So to refer to Jesus as *kurios* was to equate him with

YHWH, blasphemy in the minds of orthodox Jews. Yet it was that confession that separated the Jews who believed in Jesus Christ from the other Jews (Rom 10:9). The Greeks, on the other hand, knew Caesar Augustus as their *kurios* (Lord). For them to confess that Jesus was *the kurios* instead of Caesar was dangerous. Yet, it was that confession that guaranteed their salvation. The Christians in Rome, whether Jews or Greeks, confessed: “Jesus Christ is *our* Lord,” knowing the risks that entailed. Such a Davidic and Son of God’s reign was prophesied in the Old Testament (Isa 11:1, 10; Jer 23:5–6; 30:9; 33:14–18; Ezek 34:23–24; 37:24–28) and anticipated by God’s people. That is why Paul earlier said this gospel was proclaimed in the Old Testament.

Jesus is, by nature, a Davidic king, Messiah, Son of God, and Lord of all. By his redemptive action, he is redeemer and savior. It is imperative that the whole gospel, a gospel centered on Jesus Christ alone, is taught and believed. To be “good news” the gospel must be centered on God’s provision of the Davidic king, a resurrected, reigning, and eternal Son of God, Jesus Christ, who came to redeem His people.

Implications of the gospel

This Son-centered gospel has implications. First, it brings grace to God’s people (1:5). “Grace” refers to “unmerited favor,” which is opposite to wages earned (4:4). God has *graciously* bestowed on believers certain awesome and unmerited gifts, such as, “peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (5:1), and “no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (8:1).

But the explanation of these “graces” must wait. Instead, Paul acknowledges first his own calling to apostleship, by grace: “[Through Jesus] we received apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles” (1:5b). Paul thinks of his call to be an apostle as a gracious gift since he had persecuted the church. “But by the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor 15:9b–10a). God was nevertheless gracious to Paul: he commissioned him as an apostle “to call people from among all the Gentiles” (Acts 1:25; Acts 26:15; Rom 1:5; 1 Cor 9:2; Gal 2:8).

Purpose of the gospel

The gospel has the ultimate goal of bringing people “into obedience of faith” (1:5, mine). King James Version understands this phrase to mean, “obedience *to the* faith,” meaning, when Paul preaches the gospel the nations are led to submit to (obey) such faith teaching, that is, put their faith in Jesus Christ. The NIV translators have unpackaged this phrase as, “to the obedience that comes from faith.” First is correct: Paul is contrasting what is normally expected of the Jews in the Old Covenant, obedience to the law (Deut 28–32), with what the gospel expects, that is, obedience to the faith teaching. Paul himself understood this—whereas once he was “obedient to the law” (Phil 3:5; Gal 5:3), he was now obedient to the faith teaching alone for his salvation in Christ (Gal 2:15). The Gentiles, who did not have the law, could not be “obedient to the law” but Paul’s apostleship was not to bring people to obey the law. Instead, it was to bring people to put their faith in the Son (cf. Acts 26:18). In short, Paul’s apostolic call was to bring nations to obey the Lord Jesus by putting their faith in him. Such obedience to Christ, of course, will lead the believers to obey God and his commandments (Rom 8:4), as the rest of the letter will explain.

The purpose of sharing the gospel with the nations is “for his name’s sake” (1:5). Christ’s glory is what matters.

The addressees (1:5–7)

Paul is addressing the Christians in Rome. But he refers to them with four profound statements (1:5b–7a). First, they are “from among the nations” (1:5b–6a, mine). Although Paul’s primary

ministry is to the non-Jews (“Gentiles”), his audience in Rome comprises both Jews and Gentiles (“nations”). Aquila and Priscilla are Jews but Ampliatus, Urbanus, and Stachys are non-Jews. As such, Paul begins the letter with including all of them in one collective group, “the nations.”

Second, they are “called to belong to Jesus Christ” (1:6b). The term “call” refers to receiving an invitation. Lord Jesus Christ called these people in Rome to be his people and they obeyed him (1:5).

Third, they are “in Rome” (1:7a), the capital of the then most powerful empire. The gospel reached Rome at an early stage of Christianity and flourished. By the time Paul writes to them there are strong Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome, as the conclusion of the letter (chapter 16) shows. They are under the nose of one of the leading persecutors of Christians, Nero. But, they were loyal to another Lord, Jesus Christ.

Fourth, they are “beloved of God and called to be saints” (1:7b, mine). “Beloved” is a term of affection between people who are related either physically or in a covenantal relationship: Abraham and Isaac (Gen 22:2, 12, 16), Jephthah and his daughter (Judg 11:34), God and David (Ps 60:5), a mother and her child (Jer 6:26), God and Israel (Jer 31:20), and God the Father and Jesus the Son (Matt 3:17; 17:5). Similarly the Christians in Rome are God’s beloved people, related to him intimately through Jesus Christ. Further, they are called as holy people. The term “call” refers to God taking the initiative and the term “holy” refers to being set apart for a specific task or assignment (e.g., Exod 12:16; 22:31; 28:2). In other words, God thinks of the Christians in Rome as “set apart” (that is, “holy”) people, who are beloved by him.

The blessing (1:7)

As it was customary in ancient letter composition, Paul pronounces a blessing on his readers: “Grace and peace to you” (1:7). This greeting is unique to Paul and it occurs in all his writings (Rom 1:7; 16:20; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; Eph 1:2; Phil 1:2; Col 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:2; 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2; Titus 1:4; and Phlm 1:3). The Greeks in Paul’s days greeted each other with the word “Rejoice” (Acts 15:23; 23:26; Jas 1:1). When that word is slightly modified it becomes “grace” (from *chairein* to *charis*). The Jews in Paul’s days greeted each other with the Hebrew greeting, “peace” (*shālôm*). Paul, as a true missionary to Jews and Gentiles, combines greetings from both groups and forms his own greeting: “grace and peace [be] to you.” Such a greeting also reflects Paul’s theology: those who receive the *gracious* offer of the Lord Jesus’ salvation have ultimate *peace* with God. And this “grace and peace” is “from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:7). Ever since the Lord Jesus taught the disciples to pray to God as, “Our Father who is in heaven” (Matt 6:9), the disciples have addressed God as Father. Such an expression indicates a close familial association and a truly forgiven heart—there is no enmity between God the Father and his people. The blessing is also from the Lord Jesus Christ who made such a fellowship with the Father possible.

Thanksgiving and prayer for the believers (1:8–15)

Paul often expressed his praises about and prayers on behalf of the readers immediately following the introductory statements (cf. 1 Cor 1:4–10; Phil 1:3–11; Col 1:3–14). Similarly, Paul here includes praise for the Roman believers (1:8) and a prayer for them (1:9–12). He also states his longing to see them, his repeated but failed attempts to visit them, and his desire to reap a harvest of souls in Rome and beyond (1:13–15).

Praise for their spirituality

Paul begins by saying: “I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world” (1:8). Paul is thanking God not only for the Roman Christians but also for their bold witness which is spoken of everywhere he goes—in Achaia, Macedonia, Asia Minor, Syria, or Judea. Some believe Paul is using a hyperbole in this statement. Instead, he is actually stating a fact since people like Aquila and Priscilla, world-travelers from Rome, would have spread their faith throughout the Christian world at that time.

Paul’s prayer for them

Paul then writes, “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” (1:9–10a). The law states that one or more witnesses affirm a person’s testimony (Deut 19:15) and to call God as witness is the ultimate testimony (cf. Gen 21:23; Neh 13:25). This is what Paul invokes to authenticate his claim that he has been constantly thinking of them and praying for them.

His longing to see them

Paul then says, “in my prayers at all times . . . I pray that now at last by God’s will the way may be opened for me to come to you” (1:10). Paul wanted them to know it was not his neglect of them that had kept him away; instead, it was God’s will, for God had not yet opened an opportunity for him to visit the Romans. But he hadn’t stopped praying for such an opportunity.

He wishes to see them for two reasons. First, he wants to impart to them “some spiritual gift to make [them] strong” (1:11). The term “spiritual gift” (*charisma*) could refer either to the gifts of the Holy Spirit (as listed in Rom 12:6 and 1 Cor 12–14) or to “salvation grace” (as in Rom 5:15–16; 6:23; 11:29). If the doctrines in the letter are the “salvation graces” that he wants to share with them, it explains why Paul has written such a beautifully detailed letter stating God’s gracious salvation.

Secondly, he wishes for mutual exhortation: “that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith” (1:12). Paul’s expression of mutuality (the Greek text says, “by the faith of *you and of me*”) reveals two characteristics of Paul: diplomacy and humility.

Although he wishes to see them, God has repeatedly prevented him from visiting them. And he graciously submits to God’s will but wants them to know he tried: “I do not want you to be unaware, brothers [and sisters], that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now)” (1:13a). He may have been prevented by two reasons: (a) the imperial edict of A.D. 49 that expelled all Jews from Rome, including Aquila and Priscilla whom Paul met in Corinth (Acts 18:2), would have made it impossible for him, a Jew, to go to Rome and (b) his work in Asia Minor was not completed (cf. Rom 15:22–23). Either way, God had prevented him from going to Rome and Paul submitted to his will.

Ultimately Paul wants to visit Rome for evangelism: “that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles” (1:13b). Paul wants “harvests” among all the nations, including Rome and beyond. Paul did not establish the church in Rome but that would not prevent him from adding believers to the church if possible.

His desire to spread the gospel

Paul believes he is obligated (lit. “I am a debtor”) to share the gospel with all people. He feels so obligated because the Lord appointed him as an apostle to the nations (11:13; 1 Tim 2:7), with no

boundary limits: he is “obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish” (Rom 1:14). The word “non-Greeks” is “barbarian” in Greek. The Greek speakers of Paul’s world considered speakers of other languages as “barbarians,” implying that they were less intelligent (1 Cor 14:11) and of secondary value. Even the term *barbaros* was onomatopoeic (that is, imitating the sound an object makes, e.g., *cuckoo* or *sizzle*) and reflected how foreign languages sounded to the Greeks: rough, babbling, and *gurgling*. Paul saw no such difference: he was obligated to both Greeks and non-Greeks.

Since Paul is “in debt” to proclaim the gospel to all the *nations*, he is eager to visit the Romans and share the gospel with them (Rom 1:15), whether to reap a new harvest or to just strengthen their faith.

Conclusion

In the opening section of the letter Paul introduces himself as a servant of God and as an apostle of Christ Jesus. He reiterates the gospel to them: the gospel originated from God, was prophesied in the Old Testament, and was fulfilled in the incarnate Son, Jesus Christ the Lord, and anyone who believed in the Son had forgiveness of sins. Paul is anxious to visit the Christians in Rome, God’s beloved and holy people, so he can share grace and faith with them and also reap some harvest in Rome.

II. THE BODY (1:16–15:13)

The largest section of Romans, 1:16–15:13, is considered the body of the letter, where Paul states the core teachings of the gospel. He begins by defining the gospel (1:16–17), pauses to state why all need the gospel (1:18–3:20), continues to define the gospel (3:21–5:21), and states all its implications (6:1–15:13). Paul’s overall emphasis is that Jews and Gentiles are equal in this endeavor, from sinfulness to righteousness.

Outline:

- Section I: Jews and Gentiles are equal recipients of the gospel (1:16–17)
- Section II: Jews and Gentiles are equally sinful and are in need of salvation (1:18–3:20)
- Section III: Jews and Gentiles are equally offered the righteousness of God (3:21–5:21)
- Section IV: Jews and Gentiles are equally freed from sin and law, and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit (6:1–8:39)
- Section V: Jews and Gentiles are equally saved by God’s calling and by his mercies (9:1–11:36)
- Section VI: Jews and Gentiles are equally transformed and are mandated to pursue unity, obedience, and acceptance of one another (12:1–15:13)

SECTION I: JEWS AND GENTILES ARE EQUAL RECIPIENTS OF THE GOSPEL (1:16–17)

Paul’s life is about the gospel, for he says, “I am an apostle set apart for the *gospel of God* (1:1),” “I serve God by preaching the *gospel*” (1:9), and “I am not ashamed of the *gospel* (1:16).” He begins the epistle by defining the gospel as Son-centered (1:1–4), briefly pauses, and now continues to define the second half of the gospel as salvation-focused (Rom 1:16–17).

Paul is proud of the gospel

Paul is “not ashamed” of the gospel (1:16). The terms “proud” and “ashamed” reflect either association or disassociation with someone (Mark 8:38). Paul is not ashamed to associate with the gospel because it is “the power of God [unto] salvation” and “to all who believe” (1:16). Through the gospel, God demonstrates his power that redeems people and saves them from wrath (1:18).

Paul, then, specifies the “all who believe” by stating “first for the Jew, then for the Gentile” (1:16b). The term “Jews” refers to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen 15:5)—people whom God delivered from Egyptian slavery. Their name, “Jew” (*Ioudaios*), is closely tied with the land from which they came, the land of Judea (*Ioudaia*), but since the time of the Maccabean rule, Jews referred to themselves as “Jews” instead of either “Israelites” or “Hebrews.”

But the offer of salvation is not limited to the Jews alone. It is also for the Greeks. The Jews used two words to refer to those who were not Jews: the nations (*ethnê*), and the Greeks (*Ellên*). In this verse, Paul uses the latter, “the Greeks.” Paul explains that the gospel is not restricted to the Hebrew-speaking Jews in Judea. It is available to anyone, even within the Greek-speaking peoples (whether Jews or non-Jews). This was evident on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon everyone in Jerusalem, whether they were Hebrew or Greek speakers from the regions of Parthia, Mede, Elam, Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Libya, Rome, Crete, or Arabia (Acts 2:9–11).

Definition of the gospel

Paul explains the crux of his message: “In the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed” (1:17a, mine). This ostensibly simple phrase is full of complex meanings that need unpacking. First, Paul refers to a specific righteousness, *the* righteousness. As Paul would explain, *the* righteousness refers to God’s standard of accepting those under the wrath of God.

Secondly, this righteousness either originates *from* God (i.e., “righteousness *from* God”) or it is his attributes of rectitude or faithfulness (“righteousness *of* God”). Scholars who assume the righteousness originated *from* God explain that God attributes this status of righteousness to his people—either “declares” them as righteousness (Käsemann) or “makes” them righteous (Cranfield). Scholars who assume the righteousness refers to God’s attribute explain that by providing salvation through the gospel God declares himself to be righteous. There are merits and demerits to both views. Since Paul’s construction could mean either “of” or “from,” a compromise between these views is desirable: *In the gospel, God proves himself as righteous and at the same time offers righteousness to those who believe* (F. F. Bruce’s proposal).

Thirdly, this righteousness is “revealed” (1:17a), implying that God is the author of it. And God continues to reveal it to Jews and Greeks alike (the present tense emphasizes ongoing action).

Fourthly, this righteousness has a key requirement: “faith” (noun) or “believe” (verb). Paul often emphasizes this: “everyone who *believes*” (1:16b), and “a righteousness that is *by faith* from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live *by faith*’” (1:17). “Faith” is trusting in God rather than in one’s achievements. Paul’s construction “*out of faith, into faith*” is a Hebrew idiom that means “repeatedly” (cf. Judg 11:40; 1 Sam 1:3, 25; 2:19; 1 Chr 16:23; 2 Chr 21:15, 19). NIV captures the essence of Paul’s meaning by translating, “by faith from first to last,” that is, “from the beginning till the end, it is of faith.”

Fifthly, this righteousness is promised: “The righteous [people] will live by faith” (Hab 2:4; cited in Rom 1:17). When the sinfulness of Israelites increased, the prophet Habakkuk asked God to purify his people (Hab 1:1–4). In response God planned to send the Babylonians to bring calamity on the Israelites (1:5–11). Habakkuk was terrified by God’s solution because the Babylonians were wicked than the Israelites. And he begged God to change his mind (1:12–2:1). The Lord replied that calamity would still come, but in the midst of this calamity the righteous would “live by faith” (2:4). Paul explains that just as God’s provision of salvation was available to anyone who believed God in the days of Habakkuk, salvation and righteousness were available to anyone who believed God by believing the gospel. In other words, “anyone who puts faith in the gospel, i.e., the Son, will live.” The term “live” is synonymous to “salvation.” Whereas ethnicity—Jew or Greek—doesn’t matter, faith matters.

Conclusion

Paul begins the letter by stating boldly that God has proven himself as righteous and has offered righteous standing to any who put their faith in him. That’s the good news, the gospel. The righteous people live by their faith in God. The gospel is thus a powerful demonstration of God’s sovereignty over salvation and Paul is proud to be associated with such good news.