

INTRODUCTORY NOTES TO ROMANS

IMPORTANCE: While Scripture is inspired of God and profitable, there are some parts of the Bible that contain more doctrinal truth than others. Certainly what Paul has to say in Romans is of more practical value to us than the genealogies in Genesis. St. Augustine was converted through reading Romans. Martin Luther launched the Reformation on Romans 1:17, "The just shall live by faith." John Wesley, founder of Methodism, was converted while listening to someone read from Luther's Commentary on Romans. If there is one book that every Christian should understand, it is this one.

1. It presents doctrinal truth - justification, sanctification, adoption, judgment, identification with Christ, etc.
2. It presents dispensational truth in chapters 9-11, showing the relationship between Israel and the Church in the eternal plan of God.
3. It presents practical truth, teaching the secret of Christian victory over the flesh, and the duties Christians have toward each other and in relationship to government.

Romans has been a great defense of the faith for centuries. It is perhaps the most complete, most logical presentation of Christian truth in the entire New Testament. While some topics (such as the priesthood of Christ and the return of the Lord) are not dealt with in detail, they are mentioned and related to the other great doctrines of the faith.

If a Bible student wishes to master any one book of the Bible, let it be Romans! An understanding of this book is a key to unlocking the entire Word of God.

BACKGROUND: Romans was written by Paul from Corinth during his three-month visit there (Acts 20:1-3). In Romans 16:23 he indicates that he was with Gaius and Erastus, both of whom are associated with Corinth (I Cor. 1:14; II Tim. 4:20). The letter was probably carried by Phoebe (16:1) who lived at Cenchræa, which was the seaport for Corinth (Acts 18:18). Paul's friends Aquila and Priscilla were originally from Rome (Acts 18:2), and from the greeting to them in Romans 16:3, we discover them back in Rome again.

How did there come to be groups of believers at Rome? Note that Paul does not address his letter to "the Church at Rome" but rather "to all that be at Rome" (1:7). When you read chapter 16, you cannot help but note different groups of believers rather than one local assembly (vss. 5, 10-11, 14-15). One tradition, without historical or Scriptural foundation, is that the ministry at Rome was founded by Peter. The Roman Catholics claim that Peter lived at Rome for 25 years, but this statement cannot be proved. If Peter started the work at Rome, then certainly there would have been an organized church rather than scattered bodies of believers. Paul greets many friends in chapter 16, but not Peter; yet in his other letters, he always sent greetings to spiritual leaders. Certainly somewhere in his prison epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, II Timothy) Paul would have mentioned Peter if that great apostle were ministering anywhere in Rome! The most telling argument against Peter as the founder of the work in Rome is Romans 15:20, where Paul states that he did not build on another man's foundation. Paul was anxious to visit Rome to minister to the saints there (1:13, 15:22-24, 28, 29; Acts 19:21, 23:11); but he would not have made these plans if another apostle had already started the work there.

How, then, did the Gospel get to Rome? Acts 2:10 indicates that there were people at Pentecost from Rome. Priscilla and Aquila were Roman Jews who knew the Gospel. Note that the names in chapter 16 are all Gentile, indicating that Gentile Christians from other cities had gravitated to Rome and carried the Gospel with them. These were probably converts of Paul from other churches. Rome was the great center of the world in that day, and it was not unlikely that thousands of pilgrims made their way over Roman highways to the imperial city every year. Romans 1:13-15, 11:13 and 15:14-16 all indicate that the majority of the believers who received the letter were Gentile. Naturally there was also a Jewish element in the Christian community, as well as many Gentiles who were Jewish proselytes.

REASON FOR WRITING: Paul was about to close his work in Asia (15:19) and visit Jerusalem with his love gift from the churches of Asia (15:25-26). His heart's burden had always been to preach at Rome, and this long letter was his way of preparing the Christians for his coming. While at Corinth (Acts 20:1-3) he also wrote Galatians, seeking to answer the Judaizers who were upsetting the churches of Galatia. Paul may have wanted to warn and teach the Christians at Rome lest these Judaizers arrive there before him and upset his plans. Note that in Romans 3:8 he mentions false accusations certain men had made about him. The reasons, then, for the letter may be summarized as follows:

1. To prepare the Christians for this planned visit, and to explain why he had not visited them sooner (1:8-15, 15:23-29).
2. To instruct them in the basic doctrines of the Christian faith lest false teachers upset them.
3. To explain the relationship between Israel and the Church, lest the Judaizers lead them astray with their doctrines.
4. To teach the Christians their duties to one another and to the State.
5. To answer any slander they may have heard about Paul (3:8).

POSITION IN THE BIBLE: Romans is the first of three letters in the NT based on one verse of Scripture - Hab. 2:4, "The just shall live by faith." This verse is found in Romans 1:17 (where the theme is THE JUST), Gal. 3:11 (where the theme is how they SHALL LIVE), and Heb. 10:38 (where the theme is BY FAITH).

Romans is the first epistle in the New Testament. You will note that the order of the NT letters follows II Tim. 3:16, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for:

Doctrine - Romans (the great doctrinal book of the NT)

Reproof - I and II Corinthians (where Paul reproves sin)

Correction - Galatians (where Paul corrects false teaching)

Instruction in righteousness - Ephesians, etc. (where Paul teaches holy living based on Christian doctrine)

THEME: Paul's basic theme is the righteousness of God. The word "righteous" in one form or another is used over forty times in these chapters. In 1-3 he presents the need for righteousness; in 3-8, God's provision of righteousness in Christ; in 9-11, how Israel rejected God's righteousness; and in 12-16, how this righteousness must be lived in daily practice. Paul shows how God can be righteous and still make sinners righteous at the same time!