

INTRODUCTION TO ROMANS

Selected verses

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I have in my hand two different keys to this building complex. One is an entry key that will open any outer door to this facility. The other is a master key that unlocks all the doors within. There are several individuals who possess the entry key, but for obvious security reasons, only a few have a master key.

Now, I want you to imagine another kind of spiritual building or complex, something bigger than Disney World. This imaginary complex is truly a magical spiritual kingdom. Once a person puts their trust in Jesus Christ as personal savior, that person becomes a citizen of this spiritual kingdom. As a citizen, each Christian is given a master key to all the rooms in this kingdom filled with wonderful surprises. For the point of the allegory, this master key is the understanding of the Gospel. In other words, what Jesus did on the cross 2000 years ago is the key to how abundantly we can live on this earth today and in eternity in heaven.

In each room of this spiritual kingdom, which this spiritual key of the Gospel unlocks, there are things that we have longed for all our lives. There are treasures like contentment, deep satisfaction, joy, and the knowledge of why you have been put here and where you are going. In these spiritual rooms, the master key of the Gospel opens you to the power to control addictions and bad habits, the power to love those who humanly drive you nuts, the freedom from life-controlling fears, and the freedom from hurt, injustice, and bitterness we have felt toward others that can also control our lives. In understanding the truths of the gospel, we discover certain things have been removed from our lives--despair, aimlessness, and sorrow. Our loving Heavenly Father has replaced them with things like the joyous freedom to really live life regardless of difficult circumstances. Life as a Christian is not perfect or without problems, but it offers courage, strength, and meaning as we move through those problems. As we grow in our understanding of what Christ's work on the cross has accomplished for us, we discover confidence and worth we never had. We have hope. We find spiritual brothers and sisters who become like family, to encourage and support us, to laugh with us when we laugh, and

cry with us when we hurt. We discover that we are not alone and that God has not nor ever will reject or abandon us.

However, many Christians who have entered this very real, spiritual kingdom, who possess the master key of the Gospel which will unlock all the doors to these various gifts and assurances of God, have yet to discover them. They know that there is more to life than what they are experiencing, because they witness others living in ways they have yet to know. They are in the kingdom, but they are not living the life of a King's kid, experiencing complete acceptance and knowing they have been fully forgiven for their mistakes and wrongs. Because of not feeling forgiven and fully accepted by God, they live and think as though they need to prove to God that somehow they stand approved before Him, when they don't need to do that anymore. In short, they are living far less of the abundant life than what Jesus promised to His followers.

This morning, we want to begin a study of a book in the Bible that was written for the sole purpose of educating its readers, believers in Jesus Christ, as to power of the Gospel to transform the lives of those who put their trust in Him. And that book is Paul's letter to the church at Rome, the book of **Romans**.

This book, more so than any other in the Bible, holds the master key to unlocking the understanding of the Gospel. Historically, Christian scholars who have come to understand the richness and depth of this book have dubbed it "The Magna Carta of the Christian Faith." You will find many of the streams of truth about the Gospel in the other epistles and historical books in the New Testament, but this book provides for us the whole meal in one package. It is why in the very first chapter, we read this key verse, Paul's affirmation of the gospel, **Romans 1:16**, "**For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.**" I predict, if the Lord allows us to finish this study together, that it will take us quite some time to get through **Romans**. Some pastors have spent their entire ministry teaching through this book. We won't take that long, but we won't be in a rush to complete it.

My prayer for you as we go through this book together is twofold: First, that all of us will have the spiritual eyes of our hearts opened as to the true riches and power we possess in Christ as a result of His finished work on the cross.

Second, that as we continue to grasp and understand the major truths of this book, you will experience the complete forgiveness that is yours in Christ--you will begin to see Christ's transforming power in your life like you have never experienced it before. I desire that you will grasp the reality that you are more than simply forgiven because you have put your confidence in the finished work of Christ on the cross, but that you are fully accepted, deeply approved of as you are (even though God will be changing you), and that you are deeply loved by the God who created you.

By way of personal testimony, it took me until I was forty before I began to understand how much the Lord loves me, and I am still learning with amazement the extent to which His love embraces me. Furthermore, only as I have become truly convinced of how deep the Father's love is for me have I begun to experience deep in my soul something many of you have known long before I did: the tender affection of my savior for me. Once that light of understanding goes on in you, you will never be the same. And **Romans** is the book, more than any other of the Bible, which has the potential of turning on that light to the truth of the power of the gospel to transform life.

Understand that by the time I was forty, I had been a devout student and teacher of God's Word. I was no novice to the Bible nor to the book of **Romans**. I had taught **Romans** several times by then, but still missed its message or the ability to apply it practically to my everyday life. But once God opened my spiritual eyes to the truth of this book, I discovered that the rest of the New Testament came to life for me like never before. And I believe the same will be true for you.

This morning, our purpose is simply to set the stage for what is coming in the weeks ahead. In doing so, we will receive a history about the first readers of this letter and about why Paul felt it necessary to write them. We will receive a brief historical backdrop of the problems in the Roman church at the time, which Paul addresses. And then we will look closely at just one of the three purposes for which Paul wrote this letter.

The book of **Romans** was written to a group of people the Apostle Paul had yet to meet, but with whom he longed to be. The first details he learned about the church in Rome came to Paul while he ministered in the city of Corinth. It

was there that he met two influential Jewish Christians from Rome, a husband and wife team named Aquila and Pricilla. Between 100 BC and AD 100, thousands of Jews migrated to Rome where they established many synagogues throughout the city. When Paul met Aquila and Priscilla, he learned that following Pentecost in Jerusalem in AD 30, many Jews had put their trust in Christ and returned to Rome and their home synagogues. There they shared the news of Christ's death, burial, resurrection, and ascension and led many to trust in Jesus as their Messiah. This caused the birth of the church in Rome.

However, according to the Roman historian, Suetonius, by AD 49, nineteen years after that Pentecost, there were many Jews in Rome causing riots among themselves and earning notice by Roman historians. Furthermore, we know that these riots were due to theological differences between those Jews who had become followers of their Messiah Jesus Christ, and those who did not believe in Him. This Jewish disruption so disturbed the Pax Romana, the peace of Rome that was extremely important and held in high regard by all Romans, that Claudius Caesar commanded all Jews to leave Rome or suffer the consequences. This was the reason that Aquila and Priscilla had fled to Corinth. This expulsion didn't last long, because the Jews settled down and were allowed to return to Rome five years later in AD 54.

Before the Jews were forced to leave Rome, they had led many non-Jews or gentiles to Christ. But these gentiles had become Christians without first becoming Jews, which was part of the reason that the Jews were fighting among themselves. The traditional Jews demanded that to truly be saved, one must become a Jew first to be a follower of Jesus. During those five years of the Jewish expulsion from Rome, the gentile Christians in the churches came into prominence. According to Dr. Douglas Moo, a highly regarded evangelical theologian, from historical records he has uncovered, it is clear that at the time of Paul's writing of his letter to the Romans in AD 59, the majority, if not the overwhelming majority, of the believers in Rome were gentiles. As a result, during those five years of Jewish expulsion, the Christian community drifted away from its traditional Jewish origins. Furthermore, as a result of the gentile Christian majority and Jewish Christian minority, there was some strain in relationships between Jew and Gentile Christians. It is for this reason that throughout Paul's letter to the Romans he continually reminds the gentile Christians to remember that the gospel was and is to continue to be preached **"to the Jew first."**

As scholars step back from the details of **Romans** and look at the book as a whole, they have identified at least three major purposes for which Paul originally sent this letter to the church at Rome.

The first main purpose for Paul's writing was to enlighten the saints about the basics of the Gospel. Because of the squabbles among Jewish and gentile Christians, Paul wanted to clearly make differentiations between the Old Covenant based on Jewish Law and the New Covenant based on grace and the gospel of Christ. It is why we see so many illustrations of Old Testament examples of God's grace in the first eight chapters of **Romans**--to build his case for the Gospel. Paul used this letter as an opportunity to set the doctrinal record straight among the Jewish Christians, specifically the Judaizers, who believed and wanted to force gentiles to become Jews first in order to become Christians. Paul clearly demonstrates in **Romans** that this practice is unnecessary and perverts the Gospel.

Paul's second purpose in writing to these believers in Rome, as explained in **Romans 15**, is that he wanted them to be built up in the faith in order to assist him in his future mission outreach to Spain. For a long time, Paul had looked west to Spain and pleaded with God to allow him to preach the gospel to those farthest reaches of the known world at that time. If Paul were ever to go there, he needed Rome for his home base, as his present home base, Antioch, was too far away. Hence, this letter would serve as his introduction to the believers in Rome, as one whose orthodoxy would be beyond question.

By the way, Paul finally got to meet these believers in Rome two to three years after he wrote this letter, not as a missionary headed to Spain, but as a prisoner of Rome.

Whereas Paul's first purpose in writing the letter was directed at the Jewish Christians, to correct some wrong thinking about what was necessary for salvation, Paul's third reason for writing this letter was to correct a blind spot of the gentile Christians as to God's mission of the Gospel and how it relates to the Jews.

Keep in mind that at the time of Paul's writing this letter to the predominantly gentile church in Rome, he was in Corinth, headed back to Jerusalem to confront the Jewish church in Jerusalem about God's working with gentiles

and to confront the Judaizers about their theological error.

But his second reason for returning to Jerusalem was to take a major financial gift from the predominantly gentile churches in Greece and Asia, to support the equipping of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, so that they could continue the Gospel outreach among the Jews. Some think that this financial support was merely for famine relief. It was not just for famine relief; it was also for support of the lives of those who were committed to the outreach of the gospel in Israel. In so doing, Paul wanted to set the example and send the message to the gentile Roman Christians, “Don’t forget that the Gospel is the power of God to the Jew first (in order of importance) and then to the gentile.”

In **Romans 1:16**, the word for “**first**” in Greek means, first in time, like first, second, and third. But it also means first in place, as in the place of honor or rank, such as “the first lieutenant.” It means first in the sense of first in order, as in first base, second base, and third base. And finally, “**first**” means order of importance. Paul’s use of this word for “**first**” throughout the book of **Romans** is “the first in order of importance.” Hence, Paul’s point to these gentiles is that when it comes to evangelism and outreach, it is to the Jews first. This thought was something that the gentiles in Rome had not considered. Why? Paul will later tell them in **Romans 11** that it was because of their gentile arrogance, boastfulness, or forgetfulness. We will look at that passage in a moment.

Paul always has the Jews in mind, but not because he was a Jew. As an apostle to the gentiles, he wanted to remind gentile Christians like us that God does not want the Jews to be forgotten when it comes to missions or gospel outreach. They are still God’s chosen people, and the gentiles will always have a responsibility to continue reaching out to the lost Jews and to equipping the believing Jews all over the world, but especially those in Israel.

I have not always understood this. For the first thirty years of my Christian life and through numerous opportunities to teach the book of Romans, I failed, along with most commentaries I read, to see the significance of what Paul writes throughout this concerning this purpose. I did not see God’s mandate to continually remember the Jew first, even though it is repeated three times in the first two chapters. As well, Paul dedicates **Romans 11** to warning the Gentiles not to forget about them, and then in **Romans 15** he wraps up his

formal teaching with the point to “**remember the Jew first.**” For most of my Christian life until four years ago, my mindset was, “Well the Jews had their chance to grasp Jesus as their Messiah and blew it. It’s not that I won’t share Christ with the Jews, but now it’s the gentile’s time. It is time for us to go after the gentiles. If a few Jews get saved along the way, fine.” I really don’t know if it was simply my ignorance or my gentile pride that blinded me to God’s call to Jewish outreach. But this book makes God’s ongoing call to the Jews not just a simple suggestion to every believer, but a mandate. Let’s look briefly at three more passages that demonstrate this to us.

After having preached through **Acts**, and having used **Acts 1:8** as a key verse in my Bible Study Methods course, I once again discovered my spiritual pride and blindness at work. I failed to take note of one of the most basic observations of the use of the future tense in this verse. Look with me at **Acts 1:8**. It reads, “**But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses, both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.**”

The Greek future tense typically speaks about an anticipated action or certain happening that will occur at some time in the future. For a long time when I read this verse, I looked at it as a future point of action in time. What I mean by that is that I looked at it to say, “You go to Jerusalem. When you have finished that task, then go to Judea. And once you have finished the work there, set your sights on Samaria and go there.” I saw the correct understanding of this to be like the bullet, that when fired, leaves the rifle behind disconnected, and forgetting what was left behind, hits its target. In reality, this verb tense models more a harpoon that is thrown with a rope tied to it, which is either held on to by the thrower or attached to a boat. It never disconnects from its base. This means that the job starts in Jerusalem but will never be finished. So, you leave some there to continue the work and start a work in Judea and so on.

What Jesus is referring to here is a future ongoing event that never disconnects from its initial state; it is never to cease. For example, we read in **I John 3:2**, “**We know that if he is manifested, we will be like Him, for we will see Him even as He is.**” This is the same future tense that describes an event will begin in the future and will continue on. It won’t stop. We will keep being like Jesus, and we will keep seeing Him.

As it applies to the Great Commission, there is an ongoing continual focus of action of being witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost part of the earth. Our instruction here is not to start with the Jews and then leave the gospel outreach to the Jews, so as to reach the Gentiles. The point of the future indicative here is to describe a future ongoing happening as compared to a future completed event. In short, we are to continue our ongoing witnessing to the Jews.

Hence, Jesus' instruction here in **Acts 1:8** and Paul's instruction to the gentile Christians in Rome is to not be spiritual bigots who ignore the plight of the Jews. Jesus' command and outreach begins with the Jews, and while continuing with the Jews, then reaches out to the gentiles.

Paul's complimenting of the gentile Christians in Thessalonica on their bountifully reaching out to Israeli Jewish Christians is an example of our responsibility and calling today as gentile Christians to continue to reach back and out to Jews with the gospel.

As it concerns Paul's letter to the Romans, I don't believe it is a mere coincidence that at the very center of this Magna Carta of the Christian faith, Paul makes it a point to specifically speak to the relationship between the Jews and gentiles. In this sixteen chapter book, **chapters 9-11** deal with the roles and relationship of the Jews and gentiles.

Look in your Bibles with me at **Romans 11:13-22**. In these verses, Paul uses an illustration of an olive tree. The root of the olive tree is the Abrahamic covenant that grows into the above ground olive tree of Israel. Follow along as I read, beginning with **verse 13**.

¹³But I am speaking to you who are gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of gentiles, I magnify my ministry, ¹⁴if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them.

¹⁵For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?

Paul's point is this: If Israel rejected Jesus, and God has now moved to save the gentiles, this does not mean that God is finished with the Jews or has forgotten them or doesn't care about them. We know from Scripture that Israel remains God's chosen people as a nation of influence, who will one day fully possess the land of Israel (put on hold until the Millennial Kingdom). However in these verses, Paul warns us gentiles that when the Jews once again accept Christ as their Messiah, they, as natural broken off branches, will be grafted back into the root, which represents believing Israel. Thus, God will spiritually resurrect the nation of Israel from the dead, and they will return to the prominent "**first**" position in the Kingdom as His people.

Paul continues to demonstrate this in the following verses:

¹⁶If the first piece of dough is holy, the lump is also; and if the root is holy the branches are too. ¹⁷But if some of the branches were broken off, [those would be the unbelieving Jews] and you [gentiles], being a wild olive, were grafted in among them [the former believing Jews] and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree [the true believers of Israel], ¹⁸do not be arrogant toward the branches; [which branches? Those Jewish believing branches] but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you [gentiles] who supports the root [Israel], but the root [Israel] supports you.

The fact that the root of Israel supported the gentile church was true in Paul's day, and it is still equally true today. God provided for us a way of salvation through the Jewish Scriptures, through the Jewish line of David, through the Jewish Messiah. If no Israel, then no Savior!

Continue reading.

¹⁹You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” [In other words, “Well, those Jews were rejected, broken off because they rejected Jesus Christ so that I could be grafted in.”]

²⁰Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear [fear or have respect not just for God, but for His called people, the Jews]; **²¹for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you either.** [That is not a reference to loss of salvation, but rather that He will not continue to bless you, as He has stopped blessing Israel for their rejection of Jesus.]

²²Behold then the kindness [God’s blessing of faith leading to obedience] **and severity of God** [God’s discipline of disobedience and unbelief]; **to those who fell** [the Jews], **severity, but to you, God’s kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off.**

What does that mean, to “**continue in His kindness?**” It means that to the degree that you continue to show God’s kindness to the Jews, as you continue to reach out to them with the gospel, God will continue to demonstrate His grace and blessings to you. And if you don’t continue, “**you will be cut off**” which means that you will lose potential blessings from the Lord.

Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum, a highly respected Jewish-Christian theologian who received his doctorate from Dallas Seminary after completing a three-year doctoral program, has written much about God’s plans for Israel. In the following article found on his ministry website, he lists several losses we, the

gentile church, have experienced because we have ignored and not honored the Jews by remembering their need to be saved. Each of these loses he bases on Scripture. If you would be interested in reading it, you will find it at ariel.org. The article is entitled, “The Church and the Jews” (179), under the tab “resources” in “Come and See Messianic Bible Studies” under the category “Studies about Jews and Gentiles.”

Lord willing, we will come back in the future to examine this passage more closely, but we must move on for now to the end of **Romans chapter 15**. In this passage we see Paul’s instruction to us gentiles to never forget Israel or our responsibility to evangelize the Jews and to equip the Jewish believers in their service to our king. Look with me at **Romans 15:22-27**, especially **verse 27**. We read:

²²For this reason I have often been prevented from coming to you [Roman gentiles]; ²³but now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you ²⁴whenever I go to Spain—for I hope to see you in passing, and to be helped on my way there by you, when I have first enjoyed your company for a while—²⁵but now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints [Jews]. ²⁶For Macedonia and Achaia [predominately gentile churches] have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints [Jews] in Jerusalem. ²⁷Yes, they were pleased to do so, and they are indebted to them. For if the gentiles have shared in their [Jewish originated] spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things.

Paul says these gentile believers, like most of us, are “**indebted to share the gospel**” with the Jews. My question is, “Are we?” What are we doing individually and as a church to demonstrate that we have not forgotten the Jews? Have we considered them a priority in reaching the lost? Are you intentionally praying for opportunities to share Christ with Jews? Are you supporting any Jewish evangelistic or equipping efforts anywhere in the world? If not, why not?

Although the great commission includes “**the uttermost parts of the earth,**” it does not exclude the Jew. Rather Paul here is telling us that before all else, “**to the Jew first.**” Our personal and church outreach is to begin with the Jews.

I find it shocking that the focus of most American church mission committees is incomplete if not out of balance, because we don’t make in some form any ongoing specific contribution to evangelism or equipping of the Jewish Christian church. After all, Jesus Christ and the Apostle Paul have specifically and implicitly singled out Jewish evangelism as being first. But like the gentiles in Rome, for all intents and purposes, we have disregarded the Jew.

Of those of us who give to missions on a monthly basis, it would be my guess that few give monthly or with any regular intentionality toward the evangelism or the equipping of Jewish Christians. Presently our church, not unlike others, does not. Right now, our missions budget is so tight that we don’t have anything to direct toward the Jews. All of our funds are aimed solely at the gentile lost. If there is anyone to blame for this, I take full responsibility.

But at this point, I want to challenge you as individuals and us as a church to join me in making plans in 2017 to make outreach to the Jews a priority in our giving. Start small if you wish, but start. Whether it is through prayer, service, using your gifts, or financially giving do something for the outreach to the Jews.