

Introduction to Romans

Author & Date

Many scholars believe that Paul wrote this letter to believers in Rome in 57 A.D. while in Corinth. Some think that Paul gave the letter to a woman named Phoebe, who is mentioned in chapter 16, and that she carried it to Rome.

In chapter 1:11-12, Paul spoke of his desire to visit the believers in Rome. We can read in the latter chapters of the Book of Acts the story of how Paul eventually arrived in Rome three years later. Paul finally made it to Rome, having been arrested, put in prison, targeted for assassination, shipwrecked, and going through other harrowing experiences.

Paul's letter to the believers in Rome has had an enormous impact on the world. There are several examples in history of people who have been transformed by this letter. Martin Luther is one example. He described how he was transformed through the words Paul wrote as follows: "When, by the Spirit of God, I understood the words—when I learned how the justification of the sinner proceeds from the free mercy of our Lord through faith ... then I felt born again like a new man."

Justification means to be declared righteous before God, not by our works. We are justified through "the free mercy of our Lord through faith." We are not only forgiven of our sins, but when we put our faith in Christ, we receive His righteousness. This great truth is foundational to our faith. We are saved, justified, and declared righteous before God by believing what Christ has done for us on the cross. This is amazing grace. This is the foundation of Paul's teaching on our relationship with God.

Paul was formerly known as Saul of Tarsus, but later he went by his Roman name, Paul. Before meeting Jesus, Paul was a Pharisee. He was so zealous to defend Jewish law and traditions that he persecuted the church and put many believers into prison. Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus and called him to be His servant. Jesus appointed Paul to be an apostle to the Gentiles. An apostle is someone sent by the King and has the authority to speak on His behalf.

Paul had never been to Rome. However, he knew that a community of believers had been established there and wanted to visit them. He wanted to let them know that he would be visiting and that he wanted to share with them about the meaning of the Gospel, which is the Good News of Jesus Christ. In Romans chapter 16, Paul mentions 39 people whom he knew who were living in Rome. Thus, although Paul had not visited them when he wrote the letter, he had many friends there.

Purpose

The believers in the church at Rome were mainly "Gentiles" (referring to non-Jews), although there were Jewish believers among them. They had devoted their lives to Jesus Christ and took great joy in their faith in Him. At some point, however, some Jewish false teachers began to tell people that they not only had to believe in Jesus but were required to keep the Old Testament law and observe Jewish customs. Both Jewish and Gentile believers had many questions about these matters.

Paul wrote to the believers in Rome to speak to these issues. He explained that the purpose of the Law is to expose sin. However, the law is not a means of earning salvation. We are saved by God's grace alone through faith, whether Jew or Gentile. No one can earn salvation by obeying all of the laws in the Bible.

There were also differing opinions about whether non-Jews must keep that Sabbath, eat only kosher food, or be circumcised. Both Jewish and Gentile Christians had many questions about these issues. "Are all people really lost?" "How can I become righteous?" "Do the Old and New Testaments agree about how to be saved?" "How should I relate to people who have different opinions on these matters?" "What is the relationship of Israel to the Church today?"

Paul dealt with these questions by clearly and systematically explaining the Gospel to his readers. His focus was on righteousness through faith in Christ. Paul's central theme and purpose for writing Romans is found in chapter 1:16-17:

¹⁶I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. ¹⁷For in the Gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith." NIV

Paul wanted to make it very clear that we are saved by faith in Christ and live by faith in Him.

At the beginning and end of the letter, Paul wrote that he wanted to visit the believers in Rome. He wanted to travel to Rome and then eventually go to countries and to people where the Gospel had not yet been proclaimed. He said that he wanted to proclaim the Gospel in Spain.

Message and Main Points

As explained above, the central focus of Romans is righteousness through faith in Christ. Paul makes it very clear that all people have sinned and face God's judgment, including both Jews and non-Jews. No one is righteous apart from Christ. Righteousness cannot be obtained by keeping the law. On the contrary, the law points out how sinful we are.

Despite our sinfulness, God has made a way for us to become righteous by His grace through believing in Jesus. Our sins are completely forgiven by faith in His blood. We are justified by faith. This means that God legally declares us "NOT GUILTY" because of what Jesus has done for us.

The blood of Christ deals with the problem of our past sins. Through His blood, God sees us as righteous in His sight. Another problem, however, is the problem of sin, referring to our sin nature. Paul explains that Jesus dealt with the penalty of our sins through His blood and that He deals with our sinful nature by making us righteous on the inside through faith in Him.

We are made one with Jesus when we believe in Him. Baptism is a symbol of becoming one with Jesus in His death and resurrection. God is not trying to reform the old nature, but to kill it through the death of Christ. He wants us to die to the old sin nature and to live by our new nature in Christ. We can live righteously, not by striving to keep the law, but by trusting Christ to live in us. We receive His righteousness by receiving His life. He has given us the Holy Spirit to live in us so that we can live righteously and victoriously by faith in Him.

In chapters 9-11, Paul discussed the relationship of Israel to God and to the church. Paul loved Israel and wanted them to be saved by believing in Jesus. The Gentiles received true righteousness by believing in Jesus. The Jews, however, did not attain true righteousness because they tried to become righteous by their own efforts. They did not have faith but strove to establish their own righteousness. Romans 9:30-32 summarizes this point:

³⁰What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith;

³¹but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. ³²Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works.

Paul continued his emphasis on salvation by faith in his discussion of the Jewish nation. He wrote in chapter 10 that **"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."** This is not hard. It does not require superhuman effort on our part to become righteous through our own efforts or works. The key is to simply believe in your heart and to confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord. All who believe will be saved, whether Jew or Gentile!

For the time being, Israel has been cut off from Christ like a branch cut from a tree. However, eventually they will be grafted back into Christ when they choose to believe in Him.

In chapters 12-15, Paul wrote about living in righteousness together in the Body of Christ and in society. The body of Christ is made up of both Jews and Gentiles. We must love and forgive one another. Every member of the body has been given spiritual gifts. We love other members by using the gifts we have been given to serve one another by faith. If you love others, you are fulfilling the righteous requirements of the law.

Love means accepting people with different ideas and practices than you. Some people observed the Sabbath and abstained from eating certain foods and meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Paul taught that within the Body of Christ, we must respect, accept, and love others who have different views about such matters.

Paul concluded the letter by telling them about his plans to visit them in Rome and to share the Gospel in regions beyond. In the last chapter, Paul greeted at least 39 brothers and sisters he knew who were in Rome.

Words and Concepts

Paul develops several important words and concepts in this letter. As we have discussed, the Gospel is the theme of Romans. Although we have heard the word "gospel" thousands of times, we still need to gain a firm understanding of what the Gospel means and how it applies to us. The Gospel is not just for non-believers but is a vital part of our everyday walk with God.

There are several important words in Romans that Paul explains and contrasts in his teaching. These include Gospel & Law, Righteousness & Unrighteousness, Faith & Works, Grace & Legalism, Trusting & Boasting, Spirit & Flesh. I will give a couple of examples of why these words are important.

Paul uses the word “law” with a few different meanings. Sometimes he is referring to the Ten Commandments, sometimes to the Old Testament, sometimes to the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament), sometimes to a principle, and sometimes to legalism. Understanding how Paul is using the word “law” is critical to understanding the meaning of each passage.

The words “spirit” and “flesh” are another example. Paul uses the word “flesh” to refer to the human body, to human beings, to the sin nature in us, and to one’s own abilities and efforts to do good. Paul uses the word “spirit” to speak of the human spirit, and sometimes to the Holy Spirit.

We will sort out these words during our study, but I wanted to point out that grasping how Paul uses these words is vital to correctly interpreting each passage.

How to Study Romans?

Volumes of books and thousands of pages have been written about Paul’s letter to believers in Rome. There is much gold to mine in each chapter. However, it is easy to be overwhelmed by the detail and depth of these truths Paul wrote about and not grasp what he wanted every believer to understand and experience. Please do not let this happen to you! Seek not just to analyze and understand the truths in Romans intellectually, but **believe that they apply to you!**

Paul emphasized in verses 1:16-17 that “the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith.” Then he quoted the famous words from Habakkuk 2:4, **“The righteous will live by faith.”** Romans is a book about living by faith! Respond to the Scriptures in faith. Don’t complicate it or become confused by the voluminous amount of teaching and material available.

I urge you to make these clear and simple truths your own by faith! Chapters 1-8, for example, contain many promises and explanations of what God has done for us in Christ. **Believe that what is written is also true of you in Christ!**

An outline of Romans will be available on our website. Please download this outline and take a look. It will help you see the overall flow of Paul’s letter to believers in Rome.

Outline of Romans

The Righteous will Live by Faith

Introduction	1:1-17
Central Theme of Romans: Righteous people live by faith.	
I. Human Beings are Unrighteousness.	1:18-3:20
There is none righteous, not even one!	
II. Receive God's Gift of Righteousness by Faith. (Justification)	3:21-5:21
We are justified (made righteous) by grace through faith and are free from the penalty of past sins.	
III. Walk in Righteousness by Faith. (Sanctification)	6:1-8:39
We have been made one with Christ and are free from the power of the sin nature through the Holy Spirit who lives in us.	
IV. Gentiles became Righteous by Faith, but Israel did not.	9:1-11:36
Israel pursued righteousness through the law but did not attain it. The Gentiles received God's righteousness by faith.	
V. Practice Righteousness in Daily Life by Faith.	12:1-14:26
Offer your bodies to the Lord as a living sacrifice. Live out righteousness in your daily life together in the Body of Christ. Love and serve others.	
VI. Share the Gospel Message of Righteousness by Faith.	15:1-33
Share the Gospel in oneness as the body of Christ. Paul's aim was to share the Gospel with the Gentiles who had never heard.	
VII. Paul's Closing Greetings and Instructions	16:1-24