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Introduction to "Romans"

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Romans

Romans, the longest of Paul's letters, is the first epistle, or letter, in the New Testament canon. Because of the essential theological concepts that it addresses, some consider it one of the most valuable parts of the Bible. According to Martin Luther, the book of Romans is "the very purest gospel."

Author. Paul claims to be the author of the letter (Rom. 1:1), something not challenged in the history of the church until the present. Stylistic, linguistic, literary, historical, and theological evidence in the epistle itself supports Paul as its composer. Aside from that, Romans 16:22 states that Tertius, Paul's secretary, or amanuensis, physically wrote the letter. The amount of liberty that Tertius had to shape the epistle is a matter of debate.

DATE

When comparing the epistle to the book of Acts, internal evidence suggests that the apostle wrote his epistle from Corinth (Rom. 15:19; 16:1) at the end of his third missionary journey. The collection for the Jerusalem poor took place during that trip (Rom. 15:25-27; 2 Cor. 8; 9). Also, Acts does not report that Paul actually went to Spain, so he must have written his intent in Romans 15:23, 24, during his third journey. Felix was the procurator of Judea from AD 52 to 58, and the Roman authorities took Paul to him after the apostle's arrest (Acts 23:23-24:27), so the book of Romans must have been composed before that, most likely around the year AD 57.

AUDIENCE

Since early Christianity, some have believed that Paul wrote Romans as a theological treatise in such a way as to apply to everyone. Certain manuscripts even omit the greeting "to all who are in Rome" (1:7). The epistle, however, cites its intended recipient more than once (1:7, 15), and also mentions by name several individual Christians in the church in Rome (16:3-16). Such evidence indicates that Paul wrote to the church of Rome to address a specific situation it was facing (see *Purpose and Main Themes*). Although the letter primarily has a Gentile audience in mind (1:6, 7, 13-15; 11:13; 15:15, 16), it speaks to Jewish Christians in the church as well (2:17-24; "my countryman": 16:7, 11, 21).

PURPOSE AND MAIN THEMES

Preparing to sail to Jerusalem, Paul writes to the mixed community of Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome in hopes that they may become the new base for his missionary activities in Spain and the western Mediterranean. Because of the questions many Jews and Jewish Christians had about Paul's ministry (cf. Rom. 3:8; 6:1; Acts



Date of writing
ca. AD 57-58

21:20-23), the apostle shares with the believers in Rome his gospel—the good news of what God has done for both Jew and Gentile in Christ and that is appropriated by placing their faith in Him.

The letter also hints that the apostle may have been addressing a division that had arisen in the Roman church between Jews and Gentiles. The split may have come about as a consequence of the edict of the emperor Claudius that banned all Jews from Rome in AD 49 (Acts 18:1, 2). When the Jewish believers finally were allowed to return a few years later, they possibly encountered hostility from the Gentile membership who were now leading out in the church. If that is the case, Paul wants them to know that the gospel of Jesus Christ unites Jews and Gentiles together as one body in Christ.

STRUCTURE

Romans follows the characteristic format of ancient Greco-Roman letters and includes some features of its own: an introductory greeting (1:1-7), thanksgiving (1:8-15), and, after the body of the letter, a moral exhortation and conclusion (15:14–16:27).

Paul announces the underlying theme of his letter in Romans 1:16, 17, in which he states that the good news of the gospel is found in the “righteousness of God”—a term that refers to God’s faithfulness to His promises, especially to Abraham. God had promised Abraham that He would bless the entire world through his descendants (Gen. 12:1-3). The apostle contrasts God’s faithfulness to His promise with the unfaithfulness of both Gentile and Jew alike (Rom. 1:18–3:20). God’s faithfulness, however, is manifest in Jesus, whom God sent to be an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world (vv. 21-26). Paul explains how Christ is a fulfillment of God’s original promise to Abraham (Rom. 4) and how the gift of salvation in Christ brings liberation from both the penalty and power of sin (Rom. 6:1–8:39).

In the next three chapters, Paul turns his attention to the situation of the Jews. If God’s original promises had been given to Israel, why then had Israel failed to be more receptive to the message of the gospel? The problem was not with God’s plan but in Israel’s response (Rom. 9:31; 10:21).

Then beginning in chapter 12, Paul turns his attention to the application of the gospel to the life of the believer. The letter concludes with a description of Paul’s traveling plans, an extended list of personal greetings, and a closing benediction (15:14–16:27).

As you read through Romans, pay attention to how the apostle develops and explains the gospel throughout the letter.

OUTLINE

- I. Introduction (1:1-17)
 - A. Greetings (1:1-7)
 - B. Thanksgiving (1:8-15)
 - C. The Theme of the Gospel: God’s Righteousness (1:16-17)
- II. The Unfaithfulness of Gentile and Jew (1:18–3:20)

- A. Pagan Idol Worshipers Condemned (1:18-32)
- B. Self-righteous Moralizers Condemned (2:1-16)
- C. Jews Condemned (2:17-3:8)
- D. All Humanity Condemned (3:9-20)
- III. God's Righteousness Available to All (3:21-5:21)
 - A. Faith in Christ's Faithfulness the Sole Base of Justification (3:21-31)
 - B. God's Promise to Abraham Based on Faith (4:1-25)
 - C. The Benefits of Justification by Faith (5:1-11)
 - D. Death in Adam, Life in Christ (5:12-21)
- IV. Freedom to Live for God (6:1-8:39)
 - A. Dead to Sin, Alive to God (6:1-23)
 - B. Freedom from the Law's Condemnation (7:1-6)
 - C. Life under the Law (7:7-25)
 - D. Life in the Spirit (8:1-17)
 - E. The Glory to Come (8:18-39)
- V. God's Righteousness and Israel's Unbelief (9:1-11:36)
- VI. The Gospel and the Daily Life of the Believer (12:1-15:13)
 - A. The Christian Life as a Living Sacrifice to God (12:1, 2)
 - B. Love to be Manifest within the Body of Christ (12:3-8)
 - C. Love to be Manifest outside the Body of Christ (12:9-21)
 - D. The Christian's Relation to the State (13:1-7)
 - E. The Christian's One Debt—Love (13:8-10)
 - F. Living in Light of Christ's Return (13:11-14)
 - G. The Need for Mutual Tolerance among Christians (14:1-15:13)
- VII. Personal Explanations (15:14-33)
- VIII. Commendations and Greetings (16:1-23)

ARCHAEOLOGY

The architects of the city of Rome built it to project a sense of power. Power was central in the Hellenistic world. Philosophers believed that the principle of power drove both human life and the universe. With the rise of the Roman Empire, it became closely connected to the person of the emperor. The emperors who left their mark were often those who understood the concept of military and political strength. Augustus eternalized his power by building lasting monuments to his military victories (the triumphal arch commemorating his victory at Actium), to the gods (the Pantheon and the temple of Apollo), and himself (his residence on the Palatine and the Mausoleum Augusti).

The Roman Forum was the commercial, political, and religious center of the city—the perfect place for such symbols of power. As a result, such reminders of Rome's power constantly bombarded Roman Christians. But in his epistle, Paul presents them with an entirely different notion of power. The power of the gospel does not lie in military conquests, luxurious palaces and temples, or awe-inspiring monuments. According to the apostle, the power of God is that the gospel breaks the chains of sin and can save and transform us (cf. Rom. 1:16, 20). When anyone preaches the gospel, the Holy Spirit works in the human heart (15:19). That is real power.