

The Epistle to the Romans

The Epistle to the Romans: Its Significance

The principal theme of the epistle is the **gospel**; not so much *how* to preach the gospel (Acts), but the *doctrine* which underpins the gospel. Romans answers the two great questions of Job, 'How should man be just with God?' (Job 9.2) and 'If a man die, shall he live again?' (Job 14.14). Thus, God's mighty plan of salvation through the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ is declared, and throughout it all God remains righteous in His actions and purposes. **Romans 3.26**: *To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.*



The entire epistle is therefore Paul's exposition of the gospel (x13) that he preaches. It is 'my gospel' (2.16; 16.25). It is the gospel that *originated* with God (1.1; 15.16), concerns His *Son* (1.9, 16) and results in *peace* for those who believe it (10.15). This was no gospel learned in the Tarsus schools of Greek philosophy, or at the feet of outstanding Hebrew scholars such as Gamaliel (Acts 22.3). This was the direct revelation of the 'gospel of God' learned in three years beneath the 'shadow of Horeb' (Galatians 1.17; 4.25). **Alexander Whyte**: *He took with him (into the Arabian desert) Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms in his knapsack, and returned to Damascus with the Romans, the Ephesians and the Colossians in his mouth and in his heart.*

There is much to be learned about the gospel from Romans. It is a **Christ-centred** gospel. He is its subject from beginning to end. It is a **comprehensive** gospel, dealing not only with what we have *done* (sins), but also what we *are* (sin). It gives us power through the Spirit to *live for* and *bring forth fruit unto* God (7.4). It is a **crucial** gospel; there is no other way of salvation (1.16). It is a **challenging** gospel, demolishing modern and popular errors such as replacement theology (Chapters 9-11) and Christians living as they please that grace may abound (6.1-2; 12.1-2). It is a **comforting** gospel, clearly teaching the eternal security and preservation of the believer according to the promises, providence, purpose and power of God in Christ (Chapter 8). It is a **capable** gospel, reaching out in salvation to men and women, Jew and Gentile, bond and free alike (Chapter 16). [Acknowledgement to *David Newell*, Bible Class notes]

The Epistle to the Romans: The Servant

Romans was written by an amanuensis named **Tertius** (16.22) and authored by **Paul** (1.1); a fact which remains largely undisputed. Paul was the 'apostle of the Gentiles' (11.13); the 'gospel of the uncircumcision' being entrusted to him, as the 'gospel of the circumcision' was to Peter (Galatians 2.7). Thus these apostles preached the same gospel in different spheres, Rome lying within the remit of Paul. Paul was born and raised in the great university city of Tarsus (Acts 21.39), well-known for its Greek culture and philosophy. In 67BC, Tarsus became subjected to Rome, the inhabitants receiving Roman citizenship (Acts 22.27-28). Paul's father was a Jew (Philippians 3.5) and a Pharisee (Acts 23.6), no doubt sending him at a young age to learn at the feet of Gamaliel, a Pharisee and doctor of the law (Acts 22.3; 5.34-39). Paul was thus uniquely fitted for his service amongst the Gentiles, *being by birth a Hebrew, by citizenship a Roman, by culture a Greek.*

The Epistle to the Romans: Its Setting

At the time of writing this epistle Paul had not yet visited the city of Rome, although he had long desired to do so (15.23; Acts 19.21). Paul eventually reached Rome as a prisoner, about three years after penning this epistle (Acts 28.16). It is thought the epistle was written around **AD57** from **Corinth**. Towards the end of his third missionary journey (15.19), Paul spent three months wintering in Corinth (Acts 20.2-3; 1 Corinthians 16.6) before travelling to Jerusalem with a collection for the needy saints (15.25-26; Acts 20.16; 21.17; 24.17). The evidence for writing from Corinth at this time is strong. It would seem that the bearer of the Roman letter was *Phebe* who was from Cenchrea, a sea port that served Corinth (16.1). Gaius is said to be Paul's host (16.23), likely the same Gaius that resided in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1.14). In addition, Erastus is described as the 'chamberlain (administrator or treasurer) of the city' (16.23). Interestingly, an inscription was uncovered in Corinth in 1929 referring to Erastus as the curator of public buildings in Corinth (cf. 2 Timothy 4.20). It is also worth noting that at this time there was unrest and protest in Rome over the paying of taxes (under Nero), something to which Paul makes specific reference in 13.6-7.

At the time of writing **Rome** was the most important city in the world and capital of the fourth great world empire. All roads ran to and from Rome. Nero assumed the throne in AD54, a reign which culminated in the mass persecution of Christians (AD64-68) and martyrdom of the Apostle Paul. Estimates of population range from 400,000 to two million, with approximately 30% being slaves and 10% Jews. It was a class society where luxury and squalor existed side by side.

The wealthy despised physical toil which was deemed fit only for slaves. It was a city characterised by immorality and paganism. Astrology, emperor worship (imperial cult), and mystery religions were part of Roman life.

The Epistle to the Romans: The Saints

The epistle is not written to a particular church, but to *all* the saints in Rome (1.7). Chapter 16 suggests that there were a number of local churches in Rome meeting in various homes (cf. 16.5, 14, 15). We do not know how these churches were established (although not by an apostle, according to a fourth century commentator named *Ambrosiaster*), but there were certainly some Jews from Rome present on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2.10). Although Paul had never visited Rome, he was familiar with many Christians there including Priscilla and Aquila (16.3-16). This suggests that converts of Paul from his three missionary journeys may have moved to Rome and thus established churches there (16.5). They were not young churches as the saints were famous throughout the Empire for their faith (1.8) and obedience (16.19); plus, Paul had desired to visit these saints for many years (1.13; 15.23). They appeared to be spiritually mature (15.14) and had many brethren who were bold to preach the gospel (Philippians 1.14).

It is **critical** to the understanding of the epistle to recognise that the churches were composed of both Jews (4.1; 16.7, 11) and Gentiles, with the latter in the majority (1.5-6, 13; 11.13; 14.1-23; 15.14-16). It is possible the Gentile converts had a strong knowledge of Judaism, being God-fearers who formerly attended Jewish synagogues. This explains why Paul can presuppose so much knowledge of scripture and the Law (7.1). The importance of this cannot be overstated. It seems that there was some kind of disunity between Jew and Gentile for which Paul urges unity (15.5-7). A little history will help here. The tension was seemingly caused as Emperor **Claudius** expelled all Jews from Rome in AD49 for causing riots instigated by 'Chrestus' (possibly a misunderstanding of 'Christos', i.e. Christ), Acts 18.2. This would have left largely Gentile churches in Rome. However, with the death of Claudius in AD54, many Jews returned to churches now dominated by Gentiles. **Moo**: *One can imagine the kind of social tension that such a situation would create. Jews, who stand in the heritage from which Christianity has sprung and who were at one time the leaders of the community, now find themselves in a minority. Several key emphases of the letter make good sense against this background: the preoccupation with the Jewish law and its place in the life of Christians (7), Paul's scolding of the Gentile Christians for their arrogance (11.18-23, 25), and, most of all, his admonitions to the strong and the weak (14.1-15.13).*

This therefore appears to be the **principal** reason for writing the letter. Paul is seeking to *justify* that the gospel he preaches is God's purpose from old (1.2) to save Jew and Gentile alike and unite them in one body (12.4-5). There can therefore be no basis for tension or disunity! This does not, of course, annul God's promises to the nation of Israel, neither is it inconsistent with God's own character and attributes. **Williams**: *God has a purpose and a plan which embraces all of mankind, Jew and Gentile. He is not the God of Jews only; He is likewise the God of Gentiles, for it is the same God who will justify both Jew and Gentile by faith (3.29-30). This gospel was foretold in, and fulfils the OT scriptures (15.8-12) and is according to the commandment of the everlasting God (16.25-26).* No doubt some devout Jews also slandered the gospel Paul preached and thus the letter serves to justify 'my gospel'. Additionally, Paul also writes to explain his missionary movements, both past, present and future, and his desire to use Rome as a base to take the gospel into the west, even Spain (1.9-13; 15.19-29).

The Epistle to the Romans: Its Style and Structure (see chart)

Romans is the greatest *legal* treatise ever written. Its style is therefore in the form of question (approximately 76) and answer; a dialogue between Paul and some unnamed objector. **Leckie**: *Every conceivable argument and objection that might be levelled against the gospel is taken up by Paul and dismissed.* The book is therefore one coherent argument from beginning to end using terminology such as 'therefore' (x27); 'but' (x127); 'wherefore' (x7) and 'so' (x32). All is rigorously supported from Scripture, with 67 direct quotations from 13 OT books – 'as it is written' occurs x14.

Great themes of the book include (occurrences of the English word): **God** (x166), especially His character and attributes. He is the God of patience (15.5), hope (15.13) and peace (15.33). The gospel declares Him to be just and the justifier of the believer in Christ (3.26). The **Law** (x78), a great privilege given to the nation of Israel, but now set aside as fulfilled in the work of Christ (3.21; 10.4). **Righteousness** (x43, various forms), the very character of God, according to which He has acted to provide salvation for the unrighteous. **Justification** (x22, various forms), a judicial word which clears the guilty sinner of every charge in the courtroom of God and declares him righteous. We are justified freely by His grace (3.24), by His blood (5.9) and by faith (5.1). **Faith** (x39) and **believe** (x25, various forms), the way in which mankind receives God's provision of righteousness. Perhaps the greatest theme is that God has accomplished all this through His **Son** (x7 references). He is: Jesus Christ our Lord, made of the seed of David (1.3); the Son of God (1.4). He is the subject of the gospel (1.9). He was sent by God in the *likeness* of sinful flesh (8.3) being delivered up for us all (8.32) that through His death we might be reconciled to God (5.10) and conformed to His image (8.29).