

Introduction to the book of Romans

(For any readers- I gathered much of the following from various sources. I was not very diligent in recording the source. So please understand that many of the facts and quotes I used were borrowed from other sources.)

We have decided to approach the study of Romans in a different way. We may change at any time if it doesn't work like we think it will. But for now, I will be teaching the text verse by verse. Then when I finish a passage Mike will preach through that text. Mine will be more of an approach where you can follow along as we move from verse to verse. Mike's will be similar to the steady diet of the Word we have had over the years.

We will attempt to put all my notes in written form on a web site. We will also attempt to place all of Mike's preaching out there in audio form. Mike's sermons have already been accessed over 800 times all over the world. So we are hoping that this series will become a broad ministry to the church.

I am somewhat nervous about beginning this endeavor. There are parts of Romans that have been particularly difficult for me to understand. But all in all, it is probably the book in the Bible that is most dedicated to laying out a systematic theological framework. So it is a worthwhile endeavor, no matter what the challenges. Here are just a few stories inspired by the book of Romans.

1. In the summer of 386, a young man wept in the backyard of a friend. He knew that his life of sin and rebellion against God was killing him, leaving him empty; but he just couldn't find the strength to make a final, real decision for Jesus Christ. As he sat he heard some children playing a game and they called out to each other these words: "Take up and read! Take up and read!" Thinking God had a message to him through the words of the children, he picked up a scroll laying nearby opened it and began to read: *not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery*

and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires (Romans 13:13b-14) He didn't read any further; he didn't have to. Through the power of God's word, Augustine had the faith to entrust his whole life to Jesus Christ at that moment.

2. In August of 1513, a monk lectured on the book of Psalms in a seminary, but his inner life was nothing but turmoil. In his studies, he came across [Psalm 31:1](#): *In Thy righteousness deliver me*. The passage confused him; how could God's *righteousness* do anything but condemn him to Hell as a righteous punishment for his sins? Luther kept thinking about [Romans 1:17](#), which says that in the gospel, *the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live"* ([Habakkuk 2:4](#)). The monk went on to say: "Night and day I pondered until . . . I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby, through grace and sheer mercy, he justifies us by faith. Therefore I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise . . . This passage of Paul became to me a gateway into heaven." Martin Luther was born again, and the reformation began in his heart.

3. In May of 1738, a failed minister and missionary went unwillingly to small Bible study where someone read aloud from Martin Luther's commentary on Romans. As the failed missionary said later: "while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for my salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken *my* sins away, even *mine*." John Wesley was saved that night in London.

John Calvin said of Romans, "When any one understands this Epistle, he has a passage opened to him to the understanding of the whole Scripture."

Martin Luther said- The Epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament and the very purest Gospel, and is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul. It can never be read or pondered too much, and the more it is dealt with the more precious it becomes, and the better it tastes.

G. Campbell Morgan said Romans was "The most pessimistic page of literature upon which your eyes ever rested" and at the same time, "the most optimistic poem to which your ears ever listened."

This letter was prized by Christians in Rome. Clement of Rome's letter in 96 AD quotes Romans as if he had it memorized. The reading of Romans was part of most meetings of the church in Rome. Many scholars believe that a version without the personal references in chapter 16 was widely distributed in the early churches. It was used as their book of apostolic doctrine.

To introduce the book I would like to answer the questions **Who, what, when, where, and why.**

Who- Who was the book written by? Most everyone here probably already knows the answer. Paul. There has been little debate about this, even by the critics. It doesn't hurt that the first word in the book is PAUL. By now we should have a fairly good understanding of who Paul is and what he is all about.

Who was the book written to? Chapter 1 Verse 7 lays this out clearly. ⁷To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called *to be* saints:

This book was written to the saints in Rome. Verse 13-15 lays out a particularly Gentile slant. But there are other

places in the book that would lead us to believe that there are many Jews as well.

Rome held about 1 million people at this time in a 10 square mile area. It is estimated that 40 to 50 thousand of these were Jews. It is clear that some of these Jews were part of the church in Rome. No one knows for sure how the church in Rome got started, but it is reasonable to believe that it was from returning Christians from Jerusalem. At the time there was a saying that "All roads lead to Rome". So it would be natural that some believers would gravitate in that direction. Some say Peter started the church in Rome, but there is little evidence of that.

What- What is the book of Romans? The most simple answer is that Romans was a letter. Romans is an epistle to the church in Rome that is highly theological in nature. It was a letter carried ahead of Paul's arrival to this church. It laid out teaching and reasoning about Condemnation, Salvation, Sanctification, Glorification and Christian Living among other things.

As Mike and I discussed Romans in a preparation meeting, I think Mike hit it on the head. It is a book written about the Gospel that answers "why" at every step of the way. Paul lays out a point, and then answers why it is true. Then he answers why an objection that may be raised is not valid. Then he moves on to the next logical thought and answers more "why" questions. So the flow of thought twists and turns to not leave out anything significant in the journey. The theology in the book of Romans is similar to the theology of Galatians. So if you have problems following the reasoning in Romans, resort to Galatians to get your bearings.

When- This book has several clues that allow us to closely assign the period of time in which the book was written. In Romans 16 Paul greets Aquilla & Priscilla. They were in Rome until about AD 49, when they were expelled with the rest of the Jews. Paul met the couple when he came to

Corinth in AD 51. They did further ministry in Ephesus in about AD 53. From there they went back to Rome. Phoebe, who delivered the letter was from Cenchræa near Corinth.

Erastus was the chamberlain of the city of Corinth.

Gaius was also a Corinthian.

So the church that Paul is describing appears to be the church in Corinth.

We also know that Paul was on the way to Jerusalem with monetary gifts for the folks in Jerusalem.

Romans 15 ²⁵But now I am going to Jerusalem to minister to the saints. ²⁶For it pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem. ²⁷It pleased them indeed, and they are their debtors. For if the Gentiles have been partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister to them in material things.

The period of time most lining up with all the facts is in the following text in Acts. This describes Paul's 3rd mission journey in Macedonia and Achaia

Acts 20:1-3 ¹After the uproar had ceased, Paul called the disciples to *himself*, embraced *them*, and departed to go to Macedonia. ²Now when he had gone over that region and encouraged them with many words, he came to Greece ³and stayed three months. And when the Jews plotted against him as he was about to sail to Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia. ⁴And Sopater of Berea accompanied him to Asia—also Aristarchus and Secundus of the Thessalonians, and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus of Asia.

This was somewhere between AD 56 and AD 58.

Where- We already answered this. Paul was either at Corinth or had left it and was on his way back through Macedonia.

Why- Why did Paul write this letter to people he had never met?

We know these things were true-

Paul had finished his work in the eastern Mediterranean.

Paul was coming to Rome to launch a mission to the west.

Paul wanted the Roman church's support for this mission

Paul knew some of the people at this church.

Paul knew some of the difficulties the church was facing.

So we can see why he would write to this church. But why

did he write what he wrote? You'll notice in most of his

other epistles Paul focuses on very clear specific issues that

the churches are experiencing. This is less the case in this

book to the Roman church. Paul's does deal with some

specific needs near the end of the book. He apparently

knew some of their situations and issues. But the epistle is

much more oriented to laying a clear theological framework.

And the framework focused on the commonality of salvation

for both Jews and Gentiles.

Let's consider this:

What had Paul faced almost everywhere he went?

Persecution by the Jews. A bias that many Jews had was

that if a gentile were to get right with Christ, it would be

through the course of first becoming a Jewish proselyte.

Only then could they get right with God.

The other thing they held very closely to was the law. Many

Jews could not conceive how someone could be right with

God without so much as hearing the law. Think about how

difficult this would have been for them. All their lives they

had been taught how central the law was to every day

living. They were taught to conform to the law at every

point. They believed that God commanded and expected

this from every true Jew.

Then on the other hand there would have been many

gentiles in the Roman church. They may have never been

taught the law. They may have never attempted to live by

the law. They could have heard about Christ, expressed

faith in Christ, and been welcomed into the church

fellowship. They may have held that the Jews were actually

inferior. They may have believed that the law had no relationship to salvation. They would have easily thought that the law was not important at all. And they may have stomped all over their Jewish brothers and their Jewish convictions.

At Rome the Jews would have had a great disadvantage. They had already been kicked out of Rome once. All they need to do is raise a ruckus over Christian believers and they would be sent out of town again. So they don't have the options of recourse that they may have had elsewhere. Paul is writing to this church, and it may be the first church where the Jews are at a dis-advantage.

So what message does Paul proclaim? Without a doubt it is the gospel of Christ. You can't miss that in the first 7 verses. But how is it presented? What is the focus? I think you will find that the focus of the book of Romans is the commonality of the Gospel for both Jew and Gentile. What Paul is focusing on is that a Jew and a gentile are both saved exactly the same way. And in fact, anyone who was ever saved was saved by the same faith. Salvation has always been by faith, not works.

A person is not saved by his own righteousness, as the Jews may have believed. A person is not saved by living according to some philosophical inner light as the Gentiles may have believed. Every person who is ever saved is saved the same way by the same Gospel. There is no significant difference between a saved Jew and a saved Gentile. All of the important things are held in common. So there is no reason for a Jew to have disdain for a Gentile or vice versa.

In order to show the commonality of salvation, Paul must explain the believer's relationship to the law. A Jew is not saved by the law, as some Jews may have believed. But neither is the law insignificant, as some Gentiles may have believed. The word "Law" is used 76 times in the book of Romans. That is more than any other NT book. So we can see the topic of the law is one of the central themes of the book. The word Gospel is used very often as well. But the

word Faith is used 40 times. It is no wonder because when talking about salvation by faith in contrast to a salvation by works of the law, one must speak intensively about faith. It is very likely that Paul didn't know a lot of specifics about the Roman's church current state. But he did know the problem about Jews and Gentiles relating, fellowshiping, and understanding each other's position. So he could take the doctrine that he had carefully formed over 20 years, probably encapsulating it in a curriculum he used to teach in Ephesus for three years, and he lays it out to this church in outline form. Certainly there are topics that he skips. Romans doesn't talk much at all about the end times or second return of Christ. But that was not the predominant need of this Church.

Noteworthy points-

You will find in Chapters 1-6 a doctrine of justification that makes sense. You could write it down on a piece of paper, understand how it works, and agree with it. But you don't find any spiritual power to live a new life until you get to chapter 8. Chapter 8 adds the teaching about the regeneration of the believer, the power to live a new life. 1-6 teaches us about sin and the forgiveness of sin by Christ's work. Chapter 8 adds in the power of the new birth. It displays the power God gives to live consistent to the change from lost to regenerate.

You may note also that the word election or elect is not used until Chapter 8. Those who are fatalistic about election, those who believe that it doesn't matter what we do because God does everything and we don't need to do anything, those people would put this concept in chapter 1. Paul, the excellent theologian brings it in halfway to the end. Election is not the first concept in justification. It is the explanation of the cause. But it is definitely not the first thing a non believer needs to hear about.

This is what Martin Luther said in this regard.

Do you follow the order of this epistle? Worry first about Christ and the Gospel, that you may recognize your sin and

His grace; then fight your sin as the first eight chapters here have taught; then, when you have reached the eighth chapter, and are under the cross and suffering, that will teach you the right doctrine of predestination, in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh chapters, and how comforting it is. For without this suffering and the cross and the danger of death, one cannot deal with predestination without harm and without secret wrath against God.

In conclusion I would also like to add this.

We just finished studying the book of Acts. It would be nice to say that we have fully applied it into our lives and are living like the people in the book of Acts did. I see evidences, though, that say that we haven't gotten the point as well as we could and should have.

Acts showed us what the Holy Spirit would do in the lives of people who hear the Gospel and are drawn by the Spirit to respond to it.

Romans is about to delve into that process more deeply. We will see more of the why and how of salvation. As Paul takes us step by step through God's work in salvation, we are going to be face with a glorious opportunity.

Think this morning of an area of your life where you know that you do not bring the honor to Christ that you should. Maybe it is a point of disobedience that you consistently fail at, a sin of **commission**. Maybe it is something you know you should do but you won't do, an act of **omission**. Maybe it is an attitude. Maybe it is an action. You see it in your life but you feel powerless against it. Maybe you use the word "can't" to describe this area. You say "I can't change. I've tried, but I can't". There is something about the word can't that builds walls around territory that should not exist.

Dr. Paul is about to destroy our "can't" in regard to specific sin. While we can't get rid of our sinful nature, we can walk by faith and have victory over known sin. Paul will show us how.

As a skilled doctor he will first diagnose the problem. And there are only two reasons for our disease.

- 1- We have not been set free from sin. Which is to say, we have not been born again. Maybe our hearts have not been changed to desiring to do the law because we love the lawgiver. Maybe Christ has not put the law in our hearts. That would explain why we cannot stop a known sin.
- 2- Or we will not, or have not applied by faith the power which we have been given to live obedient lives. Paul will show us that power. He will explain how it works. And when he is done we will see that we have no excuse for not walking by the Spirit in any area of our lives.

So Paul will walk us through the diagnosis, the treatment and the cure for sin. He will show us that even while living in a body that will continually surprise us by its sinful inclinations, and we will groan for a new body and a new existence, even in this there is the power of Christ for godly living readily available to us every hour of the day. And Dr. Paul will not be contented at any point until we have tasted of the cure.

Please read the book of Romans this week. Make it a high priority. And you can rest assured that this effort, like everything truly important, will be resisted. Look to see how your life compares to the normal Christian life that is displayed by Paul's writings. He portrays the inner war, while explaining the change in nature. He describes the changed heart, while also speaking of the groaning in creation. Can we relate to what he says? And if we can, will we allow him to give us the solutions to the problems we face? And if we find in ourselves none of the desires for God that he speaks of, will we cry out to God for the faith of Christ to be worked into our lives to the point that the changes he speaks of we know and see and experience. Let's prepare this week for the journey that God has prepared for us through the book of Romans.