

Redemption in Romans ***Paul and Rome***

Lesson #1 for July 3, 2010

Scriptures: Acts 28:17-31; Romans 1:7; 15:14,20-27; Ephesians 1; Philipians 1:12.

1. What do we know about the historical background for the book of Romans? After the experience on the Damascus Road, Paul went to the desert for 3 years of study and “digesting” his new picture of God. When he returned to Jerusalem, God warned him that he must leave since some Jews were going to try to kill him. He returned to Tarsus, his home town in southern Turkey. Some time later, Barnabas went there to find him to help with the rapidly growing church in Antioch in Syria, the third largest city in the world. Later, on Paul’s first missionary journey, he traveled from Antioch in Syria to the central part of Asia Minor which is now called Turkey. He was persecuted, stoned, and left for dead. (Acts 14:19) After establishing several churches, he returned to Antioch. On his second missionary journey, he went back to visit the churches that he had established in Asia Minor, traveling as far as Troas. While there, he may have become sick and sought the services of a doctor. Dr. Luke then joined Paul. A short time later, a vision called them to go into Macedonia (southeastern Europe). It should be noted that between them, those two friends, Paul and Luke, wrote most of the New Testament. At that point, Paul entered Europe for the first time and worked briefly in Thessalonica, Philippi, and Berea before traveling to Athens and Corinth. He worked in Corinth, where God instructed him to continue working for about a year and a half before returning by way of Asia Minor to his home church at Antioch, in Syria. On the way home, he visited Ephesus; they pleaded with him to come back again soon.
2. So, on his third missionary journey, while 40-45 years of age, Paul went through Asia Minor (Turkey) ending up in Ephesus where he spent three full years ministering to the church at Ephesus and to the surrounding churches. While in Ephesus he apparently wrote four separate letters to the church at Corinth. First (see 1 Corinthians 5:9-13), he probably wrote a letter which we may or may not have but may be partly recorded as 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 as a warning against pagan influence. Then, after writing the letter we know as 1 Corinthians and getting almost no response from the Christians at Corinth, he made a brief visit there probably traveling by ship from Ephesus. They ignored his advice and treated him with disrespect. After only a very short time, he returned to Ephesus. Realizing that the church at Corinth was in crisis, after a great deal of prayer, Paul sat down in Ephesus and wrote a very strong letter to the church at Corinth—now probably preserved as 2 Corinthians 10-13. He sent Titus to hand carry that letter to the Corinthians.
3. Meanwhile, things in Ephesus were becoming more and more dangerous. The silversmiths in Ephesus were beginning to recognize that Paul’s preaching was having a very bad effect on the sale of the idols they made. They wanted to kill Paul. In the process they started a riot. Paul needed to leave Ephesus at least temporarily and he needed to visit Corinth to find out what had happened as a result of his very strong letter. Since it was late in the season and the waters of the Aegean Sea could be very dangerous at that time of year, he began the long journey walking around through Macedonia to Corinth. Somewhere in Macedonia—probably in Philippi—he met Titus who was coming with the good news that the members of the church in Corinth had taken his strong letter very seriously and wished that Paul would return to Corinth to minister to them.
4. Having received that very welcome news, Paul tarried a while longer in Macedonia to minister to the needs there while he sent Titus back to Corinth with his fourth letter to them.

That letter we now have preserved in 2 Corinthians 1-9. That was a letter of restoration, love, atonement, and reconciliation. A short time later, Paul proceeded on to Corinth where he spent the winter of AD 57-58.

5. Probably during that trip from Ephesus to Corinth, he passed through some of the northern areas of Asia Minor and may have visited some of the churches of northern Galatia. In any case, he heard about the problems that were arising in the churches of Galatia and thought that he must immediately write a letter to them.
6. While all of that was going on, Paul had also received letters or messengers from Jerusalem telling him that the saints there were in dire straits apparently because of a famine. So, along with all of his other concerns, Paul began to raise money for the church in Jerusalem. After writing a very powerful but short letter to the Galatians, Paul, looking forward to his future plans, wrote a letter to Rome, the next big church that he wanted to visit. Antioch, Ephesus, and Corinth were large commercial cities. However, the capital of the world in those days was Rome. Paul had encountered enough problems in the cities where he had worked already that he wanted as far as possible to prevent such problems from arising in the new church in Rome. He wanted to visit Rome to establish the gospel there on a very firm footing. He was hoping then to get their help to go to Spain.
7. What do we know about Rome at that time?

The Roman Republic was established c. 510 B.C. From relatively inauspicious beginnings the city had grown, surviving civil wars and military campaigns, until in Paul's day it had become a metropolis of wealth and power, as well as of poverty and slavery. Moral and spiritual deterioration was apparent enough when Christianity first began its permeation of the empire, but Rome's aura of greatness still prevailed. Although it is impossible to estimate accurately the number of Christians in Rome at the close of the first century, the enormous number of graves in the catacombs bears testimony to the rapidity and extent of the Christian advance. The fact that 27 persons are saluted by Paul in Romans 16 tends to verify that, by the time of writing (ca. A.D. 57), the church in Rome was numerically prosperous. The beginnings of the church in Rome are shrouded in antiquity. Conceivably, couriers present at Pentecost carried the message of the new faith back to Rome. It is also possible that Pauline converts from the east (i.e., Galatia, Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia) had migrated here and had planted, or at least added to, the congregation of believers. In any case, representatives from a sizable and aggressive congregation met Paul and Luke at the Appii Forum and The Three Taverns when he approached Rome (Acts 28:15). One can imagine something of the excitement that gripped Paul, though a prisoner at the time, as he faced the dual prospect of viewing the legendary Rome and seeing the congregation of believers whom he had desired to meet. Though the Roman epistle predates that rendezvous, some of the same spirit of anticipation can be observed in the epistle. (*Believer's Study Bible* - entry for Romans 1:7)

8. Eventually, Paul did reach Rome, but it was a very hazardous journey. Planning to travel to Jerusalem for Passover, at the last minute he discovered that a group of Jews had apparently boarded the boat on which he wanted to travel and that those Jews intended to take his life. So, instead of taking that easy route, he walked once again from Corinth up to Macedonia and around to Ephesus. Paul traveled with a group of several people from Greece and Macedonia carrying a large sum of money for the Christian church in Jerusalem.

9. From Asia Minor they sailed by boat, eventually reaching Tyre. Although Paul apparently believed that he was instructed by the Holy Spirit to visit Jerusalem, he was warned several times on his journey not to go there. On landing at Phoenicia, at Tyre, and later at Ptolemais, Paul was warned not to go to Jerusalem. (Acts 21:4,11) But, Paul was determined. Was Paul just being stubborn? On arriving in Jerusalem, Paul took the treasure that he had gathered during his trip and poured it out in front of the Christian church leaders at Jerusalem.
10. In spite of that presentation of financial assistance, those Christian leaders had a lot of misgivings about Paul. Paul had been working so freely with Gentiles and treating them just as he treated Jews. The Christian leaders advised Paul to take a vow and join several other Christian Jews in rites of purification at the Jerusalem temple to prove that he was still a faithful Jew as well as a Christian. Paul finally gave in to their appeals and agreed. He paid the money and shaved his head. On the last day of the ceremonies, Paul was spotted in the temple, arrested and put in jail. Thus began a long period of imprisonment in Caesarean Maritima during which he finally appealed to Rome and was taken there as a prisoner. After being in Rome a short time, he was allowed to rent a house and was kept in what amounted to house arrest. Soon, he sent a message to the Jews in Rome, asking them to come and visit him. A visit was set up and Paul was allowed to speak to those Jews for most of a day. Some accepted his message but others did not. By reviewing the letters Paul wrote from prison in Rome, we come to understand that despite his chains, he became a great evangelistic force in that city, even converting a number of Nero's own special troops!
11. The book of Romans:

The event that split history into "before" and "after" and changed the world took place about 30 years before Paul wrote this letter. The event—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—took place in a remote corner of the extensive Roman Empire: the province of Judea in Palestine. Hardly anyone noticed, certainly no one in busy and powerful Rome.

And when this letter arrived in Rome, hardly anyone read it, certainly no one of influence. There was much to read in Rome—imperial decrees, exquisite poetry, finely crafted moral philosophy—and much of it was world-class. And yet in no time, as such things go, this letter left all those other writings in the dust. Paul's letter to the Romans has had a far larger impact on its readers than the volumes of all those Roman writers put together.

The quick rise of this letter to a peak of influence is extraordinary, written as it was by an obscure Roman citizen without connections. But when we read it for ourselves, we begin to realize that **it is the letter itself that is truly extraordinary, and that no obscurity in writer or readers could have kept it obscure for long.**

The letter to the Romans is a piece of exuberant and passionate thinking. This is the glorious life of the mind enlisted in the service of God. Paul takes the well-witnessed and devoutly believed fact of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and **thinks through its implications**. [This is what sets the book of Romans apart.] How does it happen that in the death and resurrection of Jesus, world history took a new direction, and at the same moment the life of every man, woman, and child on the planet was eternally affected? What is God up to? What does it *mean* that Jesus "saves"? What's behind all this, and where is it going?

These are the questions that drive Paul's thinking. Paul's mind is supple and capacious. He takes logic and argument, poetry and imagination, Scripture and prayer, creation and history and experience, and weaves them into **this letter that has become the premier document of Christian theology.** (*The Message*, introduction to the book of Romans)

12. Paul was dictating the book of Romans from Corinth. (Romans 16:22) Read Romans 15:14 and contrast Hebrews 5:11-6:3. We have no idea who actually started the Christian church in Rome. Perhaps it was started by pilgrims who had attended that first Pentecost at Jerusalem. Perhaps it was started by later pilgrims or people who had returned to Rome after meeting Paul or some other Christian workers in Greece or Asia Minor. In any case, the church at Rome was apparently prospering. Paul stated that their reputation had gone all over the world. (Romans 1:8)
13. Paul did not plan to go to Rome just as a sightseer. Paul had taken it upon himself as his ministry to start churches in places where the gospel had never been preached. Thus, he was hoping to visit Rome and with their help to proceed on to Spain and open up new churches in that territory.
14. Why do you think Paul had not visited Rome earlier? Read Romans 1:13; 15:22-25 and compare 1 Thessalonians 2:18. In what ways do you think the Devil had prevented Paul from making those planned visits? But now that Paul thought that he had fairly well completed his work in Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece, he was convinced that it was time to visit Rome.
15. For a moment, consider Satan's side in the great controversy. Several times in the years before Paul's story, Satan thought that he had almost eliminated God's people from the earth. Then came John the Baptist, and shortly thereafter, Jesus. The Devil did his best to get rid of both of them. Then came Pentecost and the birth of the Christian church! Satan must have been very happy with the performance and work of Saul (Paul) in his early years. And then, suddenly, Paul became a Christian!
16. Read Romans 1:1. The word translated *servant* in most translations is actually the word for *slave*. Why would Paul call himself a slave? Paul was so compelled by his passion for the gospel that he could not sit still and relax for a moment. The gospel burned in his bones. On his third missionary journey, he had traveled—mostly by foot—about 2700 miles (4350 kilometers) from Antioch to Asia Minor to Corinth and then back to Jerusalem.
17. Read Romans 1:7. What did Paul mean when he called the Christians at Rome "saints"? *Saint* is a Latin word translated from the Greek *hagios* which means God's chosen people—those set apart to be His true followers. They were beloved of God. (Ephesians 1:4) Paul said that the whole world was hearing about the faith of the church in Rome. (Romans 1:8)
18. The book of Romans is regarded as the greatest treatise on salvation ever written. We will have a great time exploring its pages. Understanding something of the circumstances under which it was written will help a great deal in understanding its content. The key passage of the book is Romans 1:16,17.

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