

Salvation by Faith Alone: The Book of Romans

The Apostle Paul in Rome

Lesson #1 for October 7, 2017

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

1. This lesson focuses primarily on the historical background for the writing of the book of Romans. What do we know about that? The actual dates for most of Paul's missionary journeys have been confirmed from extra-biblical sources. When and from where was the book of Romans written? Were any other books written by Paul about the same time? Do you think Paul personally knew any of the Christians in Rome? (Romans 16) Why would Paul write a book to a church he had never visited? How much of Romans would you understand if you were sitting in church or a home while someone read it out loud all the way through from beginning to end? Paul was obviously writing to the Christian group(s) in Rome at the time. Is that message still relevant to us in our day? Is Romans the first book that Paul wrote? If not, why do you think it is in the position of the first of his books in the Bible?
2. Scholars have puzzled over the question of why the books of the New Testament are in this particular order in most manuscripts. It appears that there is no more significant reason than that they were arranged from longest to shortest! On his third missionary journey, Paul wrote to the Corinthians from Ephesus and then wrote the books of Galatians and Romans from Corinth. Following is more background for Paul's journeys and writing of these books.
3. During his early years, Paul had been the foremost persecutor of the young church. How had Paul changed as a result of his experience on the road to Damascus? Saul/Paul had had an exceptional education. After the experience on the Damascus road, did he have a different Bible? Had he changed his Decalogue? Had he switched his Sabbath? Had he changed his diet? What about his Pharisaical attitudes? Had he changed anything except his picture of God? Why would that make such a difference in his approach and attitude toward people? Does it make a difference what kind of picture of God we have? A difference in our lives now? In our prospects for heaven?
4. If you had told a Jew or a Christian who had been a Jew at that time that God had chosen Saul/Paul to be a Christian missionary to the Gentiles, which would be a greater surprise: 1) That he had become a Christian? Or, 2) That he would preach the gospel to the Gentiles? After the experience on the Damascus road, Paul went to the desert for 3 years of study and to "digest" his new picture of God. (See Galatians 1:16-18.) When he returned to Jerusalem, God warned him that he must leave since some Jews were going to try to kill him. He went to Tarsus, his hometown, now in southern Turkey. Some time later, after some converts from Cyprus and Libya (Acts 11:20) had gone to Antioch and had begun preaching the gospel to the Gentiles and the number of Christians exploded, Barnabas went to Tarsus to find Saul/Paul and asked him to help with the rapidly growing church(s) 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. (See Acts 14:19.) After establishing several churches, he returned to Antioch.
5. On his second missionary journey (A.D. 49-52), (See Acts 18:1-18.) 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.

(Acts 16:6-10) 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. After multiple threats and time in prison, Paul traveled 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.

6. On his third missionary journey (A.D. 53-58) (See Acts 20:2-3.) while 40-45 years of age, Paul went through Asia Minor, 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 and 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.
7. 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 on foot, walking around the sea 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.
8. 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 A.D. 57-58.
9. 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. (Acts 18:23) 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.
10. Paul also wrote to the church in Rome about the same time. Paul was dictating the book of Romans from Corinth or from Cenchreae which is near Corinth. (Romans 16:22) So, who wrote the letter to the Romans? Tertius was a kind of secretary who wrote down the dictated thoughts of Paul.
11. 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)

12. While all of that was going on, Paul had also received letters or messages 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.
13. 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. Paul always looked forward to spreading the gospel in new areas.
14. At the last minute as he was planning to travel to Jerusalem for Passover, 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. (See Acts 20:3 and AA 389.2.) 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.
15. 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. (See 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.
16. 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 temple to prove that he was still a faithful Jew as well as a Christian. Paul finally gave in to their appeals and agreed.

Paul realized that so long as many of the leading members of the church at Jerusalem should continue to cherish prejudice against him, they would work constantly to counteract his influence. He felt that if by any reasonable concession he could win them to the truth he would remove a great obstacle to the success of the gospel in other places. **But he was not authorized of God to concede as much as they asked.**—Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles** 405.1. [Bold type is added.]

17. Did Paul make a serious mistake by compromising with the “leading brethren” of the church in his day? What was the result? Do we need to be careful about compromising, even with church leaders in our day?
18. 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.

19. Paul had not planned to go to Rome just as a sightseer; but, he did not intend to go as a prisoner. As his ministry Paul had taken it upon himself to start churches in places where the gospel had never been preached. Thus, as we noted earlier, he had been hoping to visit Rome and with their help to proceed on to Spain and open up new churches there.
20. What do we know about Rome at that time? What happened as Paul arrived in Rome?

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.

21. 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. Can you imagine what that was like? 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.
22. Read Acts 28:17-31. Try to imagine yourself visiting Paul in Rome. What might Paul have to say to us in our day? Paul actually converted a number of people from Nero's household while he was there under house arrest. Those were not Nero's relatives as we would call them; however, they were probably members of his private security guard who were given the responsibility of guarding Paul.

Not by Paul's sermons, but by his bonds, was the attention of the court attracted to Christianity. It was as a captive that he broke from so many souls the bonds that held them in the slavery of sin. Nor was this all. He declared: "Many of the brethren in the Lord, waxing confident by my bonds, are much more bold to speak the word without fear." Philippians 1:14.—Ellen G. White,

*The Acts of the Apostles** 464.1.

Have you not experienced times when things did not work out the way you expected? (See Philippians 1:12.) Do we need to work our way through difficult times in order to increase our trust in God?

23. 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? When 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.
24. 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!
25. 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. That is about the same distance as from Los Angeles, California to Washington, D.C.
26. Read Romans 1:7. Compare Ephesians 1:4; Hebrews 2:9; and 2 Peter 3:9.
Romans 1:7: To all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.—*New American Standard Bible: 1995 update.** (1995). (Romans 1:7). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.
27. 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) As we noted earlier, Paul said that the whole world was hearing about the faith of the church in Rome. (Romans 1:8)
28. From what Paul said, we may conclude that the church in Rome was alive and vibrant. None of the known apostles had apparently been there. Remember that earlier the Christians had been chased out of Rome. But, it sounds like they had made a rapid recovery. How did they manage to do that? Later, Nero accused them of starting the fires that burned down much of the city, and many of the Christians were killed. (AA 487)
29. What kind of issues do we face in our churches today? What can we do about those issues? Are the church leaders the only ones who can deal with church problems? Or, should members be involved as well? Are we making progress toward finishing the gospel? Or, not? It has now been 173 years since the Great Disappointment. What do you think Paul would say about the Adventist Church today? What kind of a letter do you think he might write to us?
30. 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 should that affect you and me today?] 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.**—Eugene Peterson, *The Message*,* Introduction to the book of Romans. [Bold type and content in brackets are added; italic type is in the original.]

31. 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:

Romans 1:16-17: ¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “BUT THE RIGHTEOUS man SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.”—*New American Standard Bible: 1995 update*.* (1995). (Romans 1:16-17). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation. [Capitalization of entire words is in the original.]

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