

AN OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK OF ROMANS

Lesson 1

I. BACKGROUND FOR THE BOOK OF ROMANS

Many have regarded Romans to be a profound spiritually enriching New Testament book. William Tyndale who was burned at the stake in 1536 for translating the Bible into English for the common people said, “the principal and most excellent part of the New Testament.” He went on to urge his readers to learn it by heart, for “the more it is studied, the easier it is; the more it is chewed, the pleasanter it is.” Tyndale further stated, “First we must mark diligently the manner of speaking of the apostle, and above all things know what Paul meant by these words - the Law, Sin, Grace, Faith, Righteousness, Flesh, Spirit and such like - or else, read thou it never so often, thou shalt but lose thy labor.”

I. THE CITY OF ANCIENT ROME

Roughly sixteen miles inland from the mouth of the Tiber River a site of seven low hills became an ancient settlement of herdsmen from the eastern mountains. This became the site of Rome around 800 B.C. According to tradition Romulus founded ancient Rome. The official date adopted for its founding was 753 B.C. By 600 B.C. Rome had become a wealthy, flourishing city with a monarchy. Around 500 B.C. this monarchy was overthrown. A republic was established in its place. By 272 B.C. this Roman Republic controlled a large confederacy on the Italian peninsula south of Genoa. After the ensuing one hundred and fifty years of war, Rome became the only great power in the Mediterranean world and succeeded the empire of Alexander the Great. During the century before and after the birth of Christ, Rome continued to expand its empire to its vastest limits. This was reached in the reign of Emperor Trajan (A.D. 98-117). Its empire then stretched from Scotland to the Sudan, and from the Atlantic coast of Portugal to the Caucasus, an area about two thirds the size of the continental United States.

At the time of Paul the city of Rome had a population well in excess of one million people. Most of its population were slaves. The conquests of Rome’s legions brought immense wealth to the city. People from all over Rome’s vast empire crowded the city. They brought with them the religions of their lands. To this thriving, bustling capitol of the empire, Paul desired to come that he may bring the witness of Christ “to the ends of the earth” (cf. Acts 1:8).

II. THE WRITER OF THE LETTER TO THE ROMANS

The writer is identified in the very first verse of the book, “*Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God,*” Romans 1:1. Paul also identified himself as the writer of this letter in Romans 11:13 as “the apostle to the Gentiles.” He further identified himself in Romans 15:19 by describing the extent of his missionary activities as having been from Jerusalem to Illyricum, which agrees with the information given about Paul’s ministry in the Book of Acts.

III. THE RECIPIENTS OF THE LETTER TO THE ROMANS

“*To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints,*” Romans 1:7. How the church in Rome came to be established is a matter of conjecture. The church there existed for

some time before Paul wrote this Letter, for the faith of the Christians there was already well known to churches all over (cf. Romans 1:8). Paul certainly did not start the church in Rome. He had never been to Rome prior to the writing of his Letter to the Romans, though he desired to see it (cf. Acts 19:21; Romans 15:23,24).

Peter is not a likely candidate to have founded the church in Rome either. Eusebius' statement that Peter went to Rome in A.D. 42 and spent twenty-five years there is doubtful. There is not enough evidence to show the correctness of the statement. It does appear that Peter did go to Rome, but not until later in his life and perhaps not until after Paul was released from his first Roman imprisonment around A.D. 61 to 62. Had Peter been in Rome prior to that time and with Paul during Paul's first Roman imprisonment, it seems unlikely that Paul would not have mentioned Peter in the greetings of his prison epistles to the Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians.

It is thought the church in Rome may have been started by the "visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism)" who were present in Jerusalem on Pentecost (cf. Acts 2:10,11). Upon their return to Rome they then spread their new found faith in Christ and founded the church there.

It has also been suggested that the number of Christians whom Paul greeted in Romans 16 may have contributed to the founding of the Roman church. Possibly Paul knew many of them from his missionary journeys in the East. It is thought that in the course of their lives and work they had moved to Rome, where they then helped to build the church there in the form of small congregations which met in their homes (cf. Romans 16:3-5,10,11,14,15).

The membership of the church consisted of both Gentiles and Jews. Romans 1:5,6,13 and 11:13 support the presence of Gentiles in the church. Romans 2:17 f; 4:1 and chapters 9-11 support the presence of Jews in the church. It is thought that the majority of the members were Gentiles.

IV. DATE AND PLACE FOR THE WRITING OF THE LETTER TO THE ROMANS

Paul dictated the letter while in Corinth in about A.D. 57 or 58. Romans 15:25,26 indicate that when Paul wrote his letter, he was about to leave for Jerusalem with the contributions collected from the Gentile Christians for the poor Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. Acts 19:21 and 20:1-3 indicate Paul had decided to return to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey, of which he spent more than two years in Ephesus. He returned to Jerusalem by first going through Macedonia and then Greece, to collect the contributions of the Gentile churches there. He spent three months in Greece, the chief congregation of which was in Corinth. While there in Corinth it is believed Paul wrote his Letter to the Romans. The end of Paul's third missionary journey has been dated by the majority of scholars as A.D. 57.

V. OCCASION AND PURPOSE FOR THE WRITING OF THE LETTER TO THE ROMANS

Paul's letter was not written to address a particular problem within the church in Rome. Rather, it seems he wrote to the church to pave the way for his forthcoming visit to Rome and for his future mission efforts. He desired to visit Rome to enjoy the fellowship of the Christians there and to encourage them in the faith and to be encouraged by them (cf. Romans 15:24; 1:11,12).

He had desired to see Rome for quite some time (cf. Romans 1:10-13; 15:23; Acts 19:21). From Corinth Paul planned to go to Spain (15:28), stopping in Rome on his way to share spiritual gifts with the church there and to receive encouragement from them (1:11-12). Paul would reach Rome but not how he planned. He was arrested taken to Caesarea where he would be imprisoned for two years (Acts 24:27). After he exercised his rights as a Roman citizen to allow Caesar to hear his case, he was taken to Rome in chains (25:11-12; 26:29).

VI. CARRIER OF THE LETTER TO THE ROMANS

A Christian woman and sister in the faith was most likely the one who carried and delivered Paul's letter to the church in Rome. She was a respected deaconess in the church in Cenchrea, which was a seaport of Corinth on the Saronic Gulf of the Aegean Sea. The fact that her home church was in Cenchrea adds support to Corinth as the place where Paul wrote his Letter to the Romans. The important place and service of the Lord's Christian women in his church is enhanced by the fact that the delivery of this most important letter in the New Testament was entrusted to a woman—Phoebe (cf. Romans 16:1,2).

VII. THEME OF ROMANS

The theme of Paul's letter to the Romans is set forth in chapter 1:17 "*The just shall live by faith.*" This quotation is from Habakkuk 2:4 "*Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by his faith.*" The Revised Standard version says it this way "*He who through faith is righteous shall live.*" A. Nygren has this to say about Paul's use of this phrase "*In the RSV the word order in the two passages is not the same (although in the original). It is possible that Paul used the same word order but with a different meaning. Habakkuk said that one who was already righteousness would live during the time of hardship through faith. However, it seems that Paul said sinners become righteousness by faith and live. Paul saw the literal sense of the passage but, being inspired, he also saw a deeper significance.*" A. Nygren, Commentary on Romans pp. 84-88. Thus the problem that the book of Romans answers is: How can a righteous God save an unrighteous man?

VIII. WORD STUDY FOR THE BOOK OF ROMANS

Tyndale gave good advice when he said, "First we must mark diligently the manner of speaking of the apostle, and above all things know what Paul meant by these words - the Law, Sin, Grace, Faith, Righteousness, Flesh, Spirit and such like - or else, read thou it never so often, thou shalt but lose thy labor." Let's establish some meaning to the words as used in the Book of Romans.

When Paul would contrast "Law" *nomos* and "Grace" *charis*, is speaking of more than just merely the Old and New Testaments. One who is justified is "free of guilt" and on a basis of law this would make it necessary for him to keep the law perfectly by never "missing the mark", definition often given for the word sin, set by law. Grace, frees one of guilt without giving way to compromising the justice of God. Sinful man must rely on merciful forgiveness in order to be justified in the sight of God.

Faith - *Pistis* - means That which causes trust and faith F. Wilbur Gingrich, Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament page 173 or simply a believing testimony as in the case of the devils in James 2:19 who “believe and tremble”. In Romans Faith can be used subjectively, with reference to the conscience as we will see when we get to Romans 14. When faith is used with the article or “the Faith” has reference to what is believed used this way in Jude 3. In Romans when Paul uses the term as a condition of justification he is using the term in the sense of trust. We must wholly trust in Jesus Christ and not ourselves as the means of our redemption.

Righteousness - *dikaiosune*, or referred to often as “rightwiseness” is one of God’s many attributes, probably referring to that which this attribute produces, namely salvation in Christ. Those who are made “right” with God through forgiveness. For example in Romans 10:3 we will find the term “the righteousness of God” which is making reference to God’s plan for make man righteous. God is the source of that Righteousness.

When the word law - *nomos* - Greek meaning “that which is assigned. is used it is not referring to the Law of Moses. The presence of the article “the” with Law does make for an absolute interpretation. When used with the article “The Law” he is referring to The Law of Moses.

STUDY QUESTIONS FOR AN OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK OF ROMANS

I. ANSWER THE QUESTIONS GIVING SCRIPTURE REFERENCES.

1. Who wrote the book of Romans? _____

2. From where was Romans written? _____

3. What is the theme of the book of Romans _____

4. What did William Tyndale think of the book of Romans? _____

5. Describe the ancient city of Rome: _____

6. How was the church at Rome established? _____

7. The book of Romans is thought to have been written in what year? _____

8. How could this date be proven? _____

9. Who is thought to have carried the Book of Romans to its recipient? _____

10. __ The book of Romans seeks to answer what question? _____

II. MATCH REFERENCE FROM THE BOOK OF ROMANS WITH ITS OLD TESTAMENT COUNTERPART.

1. _____ Isaiah 45:23

2, _____ Job 41:11

3. _____ Deuteronomy 32:35

4. _____ Isaiah 11:1,10

5. _____ Habakkuk 2:4

6. _____ Psalm 69:9

7. _____ Malachi 1:2,3

8. _____ Psalm 14:3

9. _____ Leviticus 8:5

10. __ _ 1 Kings 19:10,14

A. Romans 1:17

B. Romans 3:12

C.. Romans 9:13

D. Romans 10:5

E. Romans 11:3

F. Romans 11:35

G. Romans 12:19

H. Romans 14:11

I. Romans 15:3

J. Romans 15:12

III. RESEARCH

How many times is the word law used in Romans? _____ Give some various ways Law is defined in the book of Romans. Cite references to prove you answers. ____

IV. THOUGHT QUESTION

Compare Paul's teach about baptism with the way most Religious Organizations today teach about baptism. _____
