



Paul's letter to the **ROMANS**

A Study Guide
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Lesson 1

Paul & his purpose for writing

“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.”

Romans 1.16

For centuries, Romans has meant much to a host of believers. For Augustine it was the knowledge that a new life was possible in Christ Jesus. For Luther it was the settling of his mind that “the righteousness of God” could save, rather than condemn, if one placed faith in Christ. For John Wesley it was the assurance that God “had taken my sins away, even mine; and saved me from the law of sin and death.” Their individual experiences with Paul’s letter to the Romans would propel movements that helped shape their times, and ours. Sadly, most of our experiences with Romans have not been so grande. Often times we have studied the letter in order to battle others over what is meant by statements such as “a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law,” (3.28) and “if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved,” (10.9).

Our modern struggles with Romans are often shaped by the circumstances and theological perspectives of those who lived long after Paul. Perhaps that is because Romans has typically been viewed as a theological treatise, rather than a letter written in particular circumstances with an author of a particular background. That’s not to say that Romans doesn’t contain much theological material to consider and digest, but when the theology is lifted from its original circumstances and forced into other contexts, theological disasters can ensue. So, before we rush headlong into Paul’s letter to the Romans, let’s spend some time examining the life of Paul and his purpose in writing to the saints in Rome.

Paul’s Background

1. Read Philippians 3.4-6. What insight does this text provide into Paul’s background? _____

2. What commission did Paul receive from the Lord when He appeared to Paul on the Damascus road? Acts 26.16-18 _____

Paul, Hebrew of Hebrews and a Pharisee, sent to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles! The drastic change in Paul cannot be over-emphasized, but the tension between Jew and Gentile did not end with Paul’s conversion, but would shape almost all of his future work.

Paul's Prior Work

Paul had almost completed three missionary journeys by the time he penned his letter to the Romans. Surveying his work as recorded in Acts we see that his usual habit was to preach first in the synagogues, but typically more Gentiles than Jews would respond to the gospel message. Furthermore, the Jews proved to be Paul's biggest opponent, persecuting him wherever he went. While proclaiming Jesus as the Christ was enough to engender Jewish opposition, Paul's inclusion of the Gentiles in those who can be part of God's people is what truly enraged the Jews (see Acts 22.17-22). Little wonder that Paul often spoke about the reconciliation between Jew and Gentile that occurs in Christ:



- » “and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven.” (Colossians 1.20)
- » “AND HE CAME AND PREACHED PEACE TO YOU WHO WERE FAR AWAY, AND PEACE TO THOSE WHO WERE NEAR; for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father.” (Ephesians 2.17–18)
- » “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)

Tension In The Church

Tension between Jew and Gentile also existed within the church. Look at the following passages and note these examples:

1. When Peter returned from proclaiming the gospel to Cornelius, how did some in Jerusalem respond? Acts 11.2-3 _____
2. What did some brethren from Jerusalem teach at the predominantly Gentile church of Antioch? Acts 15.1-2 _____
3. What rumors were being circulated about Paul among the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem? Acts 21.27-28 _____

Paul was very aware of the tension within the church. One of his prior letters (Galatians) was written to combat doctrines similar to the one taught in Acts 15. Furthermore, one of Paul's purposes for his third journey was to raise money for needy saints in Jerusalem. As he explained to the brethren in Rome, Paul hoped this contribution from Gentile churches for their Jewish brethren would help to ease this tension in the church (see Romans 15.25-31).

Tension In The Churches Of Rome

We are not told how the gospel first made it to Rome, but since there were Jews from Rome present at Pentecost (Acts 2.5-10) it is likely that the news of Jesus' resurrection made it to the Imperial capital without further aid from the apostles. This coincides with other information found within Acts. When Paul first journeyed to Corinth he met there two Jewish Christians, Aquila and Priscilla, who had come to Corinth from Rome. It is likely that when the gospel was first spread in the synagogues of Rome and that the earliest churches in Rome were comprised predominantly of Jewish Christians, with several Gentile proselytes joining their numbers. But then the Jews were expelled from Rome, a historical event that is confirmed by the Biblical text (Acts 18.2). What happened to the makeup of the Roman churches during that time? We can only guess, but it is likely that they took on a Gentile flavour and that by the time the Jews were allowed to return, there were more Gentile Christians in Rome than Jewish. And that resulted in tension between Jew and Gentile within the Roman churches, a fact acknowledged by Paul within the text of his letter:

“Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers, and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written, “THEREFORE I WILL GIVE PRAISE TO YOU AMONG THE GENTILES, AND I WILL SING TO YOUR NAME.” Again he says, “REJOICE, O GENTILES, WITH HIS PEOPLE.” And again, “PRAISE THE LORD ALL YOU GENTILES, AND LET ALL THE PEOPLES PRAISE HIM.” Again Isaiah says, “THERE SHALL COME THE ROOT OF JESSE, AND HE WHO ARISES TO RULE OVER THE GENTILES, IN HIM SHALL THE GENTILES HOPE.” Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 15.7–13)

The Solution To Jewish-Gentile Tension: The Gospel

- 1. The Gospel shows that both Jew and Gentile stand in equal need (Romans 1-3)**
- 2. The Gospel shows how salvation can be received by both Jew and Gentile (Romans 4-8)**
- 3. The Gospel shows God's true will for the Jews (Romans 9-11)**
- 4. The Gospel shows how all of our lives should look in Christ (Romans 12-16)**