

Romans – Session One

It is commonly agreed that the Epistle to the Romans is one of the greatest of all Christian writings. Romans has influenced so many of the great figures of the Church down through every age.

Augustine of Hippo was converted through reading a passage from Romans.

Martin Luther's spiritual life was greatly shaped by Romans.

The Reformation was in large part due to the influence of Paul's letter to the Romans.

John Wesley's conversion was triggered by hearing Luther's preface to Romans.

In our more modern times, Karl Barth's theology which led to a resurgence of Biblically based theology was greatly influenced by Romans.

Authorship - In ch. 1:1 – The letter claims to be written by Paul and it is universally agreed and accepted that Paul was the author of this great letter. It is one of 13 Pauline letters in the New Testament. A sign of how important Romans is for our understanding of the faith, the other 12 Pauline letters average 1,300 words. Romans has 7,100 words, a sign that Paul saw the letter as his major writing. That in no way diminishes the importance of all of the other 12 Epistles Paul wrote, it just highlights that Romans was Paul's major work. It is his crowning theological statement.

To whom was it written? - It was written to the church in Rome as indicated in ch. 1:7, and 1:15. One of the mysteries of the church in Rome is we do not know how and by whom the church in Rome was established. In Acts 2:10, we read about Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost. Acts 2:10 informs us that there were "visitors from Rome" in Jerusalem who experienced Pentecost. It is possible they went back to Rome and founded the church there in response to Peter's sermon. It is also possible, since Rome was the center of trading and commerce, that merchants passing through Rome had something to do with the start of the church in Rome. The truth is we can only speculate as to who started the church in Rome.

We do know the church was initially made up of Jewish converts, who previously worshipped in the synagogues, which were home based communities of faith. The church in Rome had to struggle with the tension between Jews and Gentiles. Some chose to follow Christ while others objected so violently that there were riots in 49 AD as told by the historian Orosius. So we can date the start up of the church in Rome at least by 49 AD. If the first converts were Jews, that did not last long before the doors were open to the Gentiles. By the time Paul wrote his letter to the church in Rome there was already present a large Gentile contingent. (1:5-6, 11:13-22, 10:1-2, 15:15-16).

Paul speaks of "Abraham as our Father" (4:1), writes to people who know the law (7:1), and who have died to the law (7:4). Romans is clearly written to both Jews and Gentiles in the Roman Church.

Date of writing – The Epistle to the Romans is widely acclaimed to have been written while Paul stayed in Corinth while he was planning a trip to take up a collection for the poor and deliver it to Jerusalem, and then go on to Rome. (Acts 19:21, Acts 24:17, Romans 15:24-26, 28, Romans 15:26-28. The usual dating of Romans is 55 AD, but it is not a firm dating.

Why did Paul write the letter? - The Epistle does not offer much help internally with the question of why he wrote Romans. Paul had never been to Rome, but he had wanted to go there for a long time – ch 1: 8-13 - He had a trip planned to Spain – ch. 15:22-29 which meant he could stop in Rome to visit the church on his way to Spain.

On the one hand he wanted to impart some "spiritual gift" to the Roman Christians, to have "some fruit among them" ch. 1: 11, 13, 15 – On the other hand Paul says it is not his usual custom to preach the Gospel where Christ was already named lest he build on someone else's foundation - ch 15:20.

The reality of Romans is it does not deal with local church issues like most of Paul's Epistles. Romans is a majestic expression of Paul's theology and proclamation of the Gospel. He only addresses one issue in the letter that might be considered a local church issue, namely the issue of how you live your life among the weaker and less mature Christians, and the respect you need to have about differences of opinions about certain customs about eating food, drinking wine, etc. Ch 14:1-15:13.

Scholars note the following about Romans - It is a letter giving us Paul's teaching about the essentials about being a Christian. It also teaches us about the church. Many believe that Romans is what is known as a "Circular" letter, that it was meant not so much for a particular church (Rome), but for all the churches and that it was undoubtedly circulated as such - Paul's most important teaching. It takes on the difficult historical question about the interface with Judaism.

Paul's life - Paul was brought up as an Orthodox Jew, a loyal Pharisee who was fanatical to the point of persecuting the Christian Church. He was dramatically changed by his experience of the Risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. Acts: 9:1-22. His conversion revolutionized his life. Paul came to recognize that God incarnated himself, and that it was through the cross that salvation was now available to all people. "The scandal of particularity" (Jews as the chosen people), was now over. Anyone who believes could be part of the Kingdom of God. Grace not law is now decisive. It is the divine initiative of God that opens the doors of heaven to all believers.

By the time Paul wrote Romans he had been a convert for 20 years preaching all over the Roman empire. So his thinking was his most mature thoughts and theology. In Acts 20:3 - Paul has 3 months without any commitments and most think this is when he wrote Romans, to set out his summary of the Gospel. The Roman Church was filled with Jews and Gentiles. Since he was planning a trip to Spain to take up an offering for the church in Jerusalem, he writes this letter as a precursor to his visit to give his theology and beliefs. In Romans Paul spells out what he wants to accomplish on this trip:

1. To prepare the way for his visit - ch 1:13, 1:15, and 15:22-24
2. To secure the support of the Roman Christians for his Spanish mission - ch 15:24
3. And to seek the prayers of the Romans that he might be delivered from "the unbelievers" that the church in Jerusalem would welcome the gift he was bringing, and that he might come to Rome in joy - ch 15:30-32