

The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans

Romans serves as the flagship of the fleet of Pauline letters within the New Testament. This letter has also loomed large in the history of Christianity. Countless men and women of faith have singled out Romans as the weapon God graciously used to bring about their surrender to Christ. Augustine, Martin Luther, John Wesley, and others received unexpected spiritual volleys from Romans that pierced their defenses and ended their rebellion against God.

Romans combines breadth, logic, and a mature understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures into a powerful arsenal. By the time it was written, the Holy Spirit had shaped the apostle Paul into a skillful communicator of the faith. The result is his letter to the Romans, a theological treatise that perfectly fits Paul's description of all Scripture as "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). The letter represents a full expression of apostolic theology. Paul's arguments challenge the secular, pagan mind, yet they also pierce the shallow spiritual confidence of many nonpagans. Romans is a mighty leveler, for it declares that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23). Since all are sinners, it comes as a delightful shock that "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (5:8). This is the Good News, which Paul so eloquently and systematically defends in this theological treatise addressed to the Romans.

Author and Date • The author introduces himself in the first verses of Romans by name (Paul), by identity (bondservant), by vocation (apostle), and by purpose (separated to the gospel of God). Romans has been recognized as an epistle of Paul throughout church history. The character and message of Paul, which we read so much about in Acts, appear in Romans as his signature to the letter.

This letter was written to a vibrant church in the city of Rome. Although the origins of the church are unknown, it could have been established by new believers returning from Jerusalem following the Resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. When Paul wrote this letter he had not personally visited Rome, although he had desired to do so for some time.

Few clues are included in the Epistle to the Romans about the Roman believers. Paul admired their faith and prayed regularly for them. It is evident that the church included both Jews and Gentiles. On the surface it does not appear that any problem in the church at Rome was the occasion for the epistle. However, there is some indication that the believers at Rome needed to be exhorted to live in harmony (14:1–15:13). Evidence in the Corinthian letters, in Romans, and in Acts indicates that Paul wrote to the Roman church from Corinth on his third missionary journey. When Paul composed the Corinthian epistles, he referred to a collection for the poor Christian believers in Jerusalem that was being gathered from the various Mediterranean churches (1 Cor. 16:1–3; 2 Cor. 8:1–9:1). By the time Romans was written that task had been completed and Paul was about to depart to Jerusalem to deliver the funds (15:22–29).

The implication is that Paul planned to sail for Judea directly from Corinth. Phoebe also, a fellow believer, was about to leave Corinth for Rome. She was presumably the bearer of the letter from Paul to the Romans. Since practically all navigation on the Mediterranean Sea ceased after November 11 and was not resumed again until March 10, Romans was likely written in the fall of A.D. 57.

A plot by the Jews, however, changed Paul's travel plans. Instead of taking a ship from Corinth, he went through Macedonia by foot (Acts 20:3) and eventually left for Jerusalem from Philippi the next spring (Acts 20:6). Little did Paul know that his eventual arrival in Rome would be in captivity (Acts 28:17–31).

Purpose • All of Paul's other letters arise from a particular occasion and have a definite purpose. Romans is different; from the content it seems to have a much more general didactic aim. Having said this, it is possible to see at least three purposes Paul had in writing the book.

His first purpose was to prepare the Romans for his planned journey to Rome and later to Spain. His immediate itinerary involved a trip to Jerusalem, but his vision was toward the west. He clearly suggests that he expects assistance from them in his endeavor to carry the gospel to Spain (15:24). But if that had been his only purpose, a brief note would have been enough. Obviously Paul had more in mind.

A second purpose involved Paul's understanding that the believers needed to "be established" (1:11). Paul wanted to give them a well-instructed faith. His letter is a kind of syllabus of Paul's apostolic teaching. Romans is a masterful presentation of God's plan of salvation for Jews and Gentiles.

The third purpose for the letter was pastoral. Paul wanted to exhort Jewish and Gentile believers to live in harmony. As in most of the early churches, the gospel brought different groups of people together who otherwise would have stayed apart, whether for reasons of nationality, status, or culture. Once they came together under one roof, the challenge was to preserve their oneness in Christ. Thus throughout the letter, Paul deals with problems arising from Jewish and Gentile differences. He emphasizes what everyone shared. Since there is only one God, He is the God of both Jew and Gentile. Both groups are under sin (3:9), and both are saved through faith (3:30). This theme of Jew and Gentile living together surfaces most clearly in chapters 14 and 15, where Paul deals with the practical aspects of being together in one body. Paul hammers home his central theme: The righteous God justifies and ultimately glorifies both Jew and Gentile by grace through faith.

Theology • Romans includes the most systematic presentation of theology found anywhere in Scripture. It explains the meaning of the Cross for the believer's life. While expounding why Jesus died for all of humanity, Paul clarifies the core concepts of the Christian faith: sin and righteousness, faith and works, justification and election. The letter contains (1) a detailed description of the sinfulness of man (1:18—3:20); (2) an extensive discussion of justification by faith (3:21—5:11), including a clear interpretation of the death of Christ (3:24—26); (3) an elaborate explanation of sanctification (5:12—8:39); (4) a strong section on the doctrine of election (9:1—29); (5) a developed exposition of what happened to the nation of Israel and the destiny of God's people (9:1—11:36); (6) an extended section addressing spiritual gifts (12:1—8); and (7) instructions on the believers' relationship to government (13:1—14). Certainly Romans is the most doctrinal book in the Bible. Because it provides a systematic outline of the essentials of the Christian faith, it is as useful to the mature believer as it is to someone who wants a short introduction to the Christian faith.

Christ in the Scriptures

Paul explains that Jesus Christ is the Second Adam whose righteousness and substitutionary death have provided justification for all who place their faith in Him. By reading Romans we can see how the apostle breaks down a truckload of theological truth into bite-sized installments by using a question-and-answer format.

C. A.D. 47-49

Paul's first missionary journey

C. A.D. 50

The Jerusalem council

C. A.D. 50-53

Paul's second missionary journey

C. A.D. 53-57

Paul's third missionary journey

C. A.D. 57

Romans is written

C. A.D. 58

Paul is arrested in Jerusalem

C. A.D. 60-62

Paul is imprisoned in Rome

C. A.D. 67

Peter and Paul are executed