

THE LETTER TO THE ROMANS – PART I

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

I. The Letter to the Romans was probably written in about 57-58 A.D. as a comment on theological disputes that had arisen among the Christians in Rome, particularly in response to the Jewish community there.

A. Unlike most of the Pauline letters, this letter was not directed to a church that St. Paul helped found.

1. The Church in Rome was apparently founded early by new Christians returning from the first Pentecost. See Acts 2:12. Those first Christians from Rome were probably some combination of Jews and "God-fearers," i.e. people who were not Jews, but believed in the true God of the Jews worshipped Him.

2. According to tradition St. Peter first came to Rome in about 42 A.D. Whenever he arrived, his presence would make Rome the center of the Church on earth.

3. There was a large Jewish community in Rome, estimated at about 50,000 out of a population of one million. In 49 A.D., the Emperor Claudius had expelled the Jews (including presumably Christians) from Rome because of disputes among them. The chances are that part of the controversy came from opposition to the new Christians. However, after Nero came to the throne in 54 A.D., the Jews were allowed back, partially because of the influence of Nero's wife.

4. In Rome, there would be a strong sense of law, both civil and natural, but also a lot of decadence. The letter to the Romans would deal with this idea of law, as well as the question of how the new faith relates to Judaism.

B. St. Paul probably wrote the letter from Corinth during his third missionary journey.

1. St. Paul had long wanted to come to Rome, see chapter 1, verses 101-15. It appears that he was intending to make a mission to Spain and come to Rome on the way there. See Romans 15:24, 28-29. However, as least by the time of his first appearance in Rome about 60 A.D., he had not apparently made that journey yet.

2. The references to gathering a collection for Jerusalem and to Gaius, see Rom. 15:26-27, 16:23, the letter was

apparently written from Corinth. See Acts 18; 1 Cor. 1:14. He wanted to set forth theological perspectives and advice in advance of the anticipated visit.

- At this point, the official Roman persecution had not yet begun, but there were clearly struggles among the early Christians. St. Paul himself, and the other missionaries, were often persecuted by the general public, or jealous religious leaders.

C. The letter deals with the value, but limitations of the law and the covenant given to the Jews. It describes grace, not law, as the source of salvation, but law as needed both to lead to grace and also to live out the new life.

1. After the introduction in chapter 1, see Acts 1:1-15, St. Paul describes how everyone is under the law and is judged according to it, whether they are Jews or Gentiles. See Acts 1:16-2:29

2. Chapter 3 then begins with the questions St. Paul will be addressing in the next chapters. The questions basically focus on three issues: (1) what is the advantage of being a Jew if everyone is under God's law; (2) how is God just if His law leads to condemnation; (3) if God is willing to justify us despite our sins, what difference does sin make. The chapter then goes on to develop the major theme that all humanity is sinful and, therefore, is justified by faith, not works

3. Chapters 4 to 7 then give answers to the questions from chapter 3.

a. In chapter 4, St. Paul describes the primary gift given to Abraham and his children as faith, not the law. St. Paul will deal in chapters 4 and 7 about what the law accomplished.

b. Chapter 5 then describes God's sort of justice, a justice that reconciles sinners to Himself, and overcomes sins, not by ignoring them, but rather by the greater act of love. The letter also introduces the idea that the law does lead to grace precisely by showing us sin and thus the need for Christ.

c. Chapters 6 and 7 then deal with the question of why we must avoid sin if we are forgiven of it. Chapter 6 answers the question in terms of whom we are serving. Sin involves serving the flesh and thus rejecting Jesus; and the flesh will bring death. We must try to live by the commands of Jesus and thus show ourselves to be His servants on the way to life. Chapter 7 recognizes that, even after this conversion there will still be struggles.

4. Chapter 8 then, at the center of the letter, describes the glorious new life of the Spirit that Christians are called to live as adopted sons and daughters of God, and the greater promises of a new heavens and a new earth.

5. Chapters 9 to 11 describe in greater detail God's calling to the Jews of old, and His continual desire to bring His people to the new covenant long promised.

- Chapters 9 and 10 discuss the calling to the Jews as very real, but rejected by many who called themselves Jews, but were not in fact true to the covenant.

- Chapter 11, however, speaks of the Jews who were faithful and whom God continually calls to enter now into this new life in Christ.

6. Chapters 12 to 14 and the first 22 verses of chapter 15 describe living out this new life of the Spirit.

- Chapter 12 describes the unity of the Church and the importance of charity on the road to salvation.

- Chapter 13 speaks of the importance of law, both civil and moral, and of the call to be free from sin and free to love.

- Chapter 14 and the first 13 verses of chapter 15 speak of the importance of avoiding unnecessary burdens, whether unnecessary laws, or causing scandal to others. Again, there is the emphasis on freedom, but freedom used for love, and a freedom that offers sacrifice for holiness.

7. Chapters 15 and 16 conclude with a discussion of St. Paul's plans and greetings to and from a number of co-workers of St. Paul and the other missionaries.

II. The first two chapters of Romans outline the theme of human sinfulness under the law and thus set up the gospel of redemption by grace.

A. The introduction sets up the theme of receiving glory precisely by serving Christ and receiving the promises made through the

Jews and fulfilled in Him.

1. As he usually does, St. Paul describes himself as a slave of Christ, who receives from Him the glory of apostleship.

- St. Paul is thus in the line of the great figures of the Old Testament, who were special servants of the Lord. See, e.g., 2 Kings 18:12; Judges 2:8; Ps. 27:9, 31:17, 105:42.

- The letter will later develop this theme that all Christians are called to receive the glory of adopted sonship, precisely by being slaves of righteousness and thus of God.

2. There has been a great deal of debate about what St. Paul meant by Christ being "established as the Son of God in power through the Spirit of Holiness by the resurrection from the dead."

- St. Paul plainly understood that Jesus was already the Son of God at the time of His death. See Rom. 8:31-32. The term here "horisthentos" could mean "defined," as in a word being defined. Thus, it most likely means that Jesus was made comprehensible to us as the Son of God by the Resurrection.

3. The introduction describes the gospel as promised "through the Scriptures," which would be the Hebrew Scriptures, and Jesus as a descendant from David according to the flesh. Thus, St. Paul is eager to connect the gospel to Israel. But the introduction then concludes with the description of the message to be proclaimed to all the nations.

4. The message is sent to "all of the beloved of God in Rome, who are called to be holy." The idea is that all Christians are called, not only to avoid sin, but to aspire to holiness. The letter will later describe this life in the Spirit.

5. As is generally the case with his letters, St. Paul continues on with a positive sense of thanksgiving in verses 8 to 15, expressing his desire to be with the Romans. He expresses his desire, not only to teach the Romans, but also that all of their faiths may grow together. Here, St. Paul is setting up the theme he will describe in later chapters of the faithful growing towards God together. In verses 16 and 17, he also reiterates the theme of Jew and Gentile growing together.

B. The rest of chapter 1 and chapter 2 then describe the universality of God's law and judgment under it.

1. St. Paul begins by saying that all people can know God, and thus presumably His moral law. However, as a practical matter, people refuse to do so and instead turn to idolatry.

- St. Paul may not be saying that every single pagan is personally at fault for idolatry, but he is saying that it is not merely an innocent mistake. It is a deliberate turning from God. St. Paul may have been basing this comment on the Book of Wisdom, which describes the background of idolatry at great length. See Wis. 13:1-15:17.

- His language about turning away from God to worship beasts parallels the condemnation of Israel for turning to idolatry. The idea is that all people are sinful by the standard of God's judgment. Ps. 106:20-23; Jer. 2:11.

2. St. Paul then describes how God allows people who refuse to worship Him fall into degrading sins.

- In verses 29 to 32, St. Paul lists the range of sins, but he focuses especially on sexual sins. There are several possible reasons for this particular emphasis: (1) sexual perversions were a common sin among the Romans, although they generally did disapprove of it; (2) there may be an association with failing to know God and evil "knowing" (in the sexual sense); (3) St. Paul may have been building upon the common analogy between idolatry by the Chosen People and adultery; or (4) there may be a connection between rejecting the mystery of God for the sameness of earthly things and the desire for the same sex romantically.

- In any case, St. Paul is emphasizing that idolatry has a moral effect because God allows it to manifest itself in sins. Idolatry is the primary sin, with the others sins being the effect that manifests it.

3. Chapter 2 then calls for everyone to make an examination of conscience asking whether anyone has really kept the law. The warning is that any breaking of the law will result in God's wrath.

- Even Moses of old could not enter the Promised Land because he had shown unjust anger, or possibly unbelief, once. See Num. 20:8-12; Duet. 4:21-24. The message is that no one, without God's saving grace, could really be right with Him.

- The chapter then argues that all people are under God-given law. Gentiles can discover and act upon it by their natural conscience; and Jews know it by revelation. The truly faithful Jew is the one who acts in accordance with

this law, not the one who is simply among God's people. The law is valuable only if one keeps it, and works to condemnation if one does not.