

Introduction to Romans

by Dr. Jack L. Arnold

Some men have stated that the Book of Romans is the “most profound writing that exists.” This book is great both because it is part of God’s Holy Scripture, and because it is great literature and logic. It is the greatest of philosophies, and it is more than a philosophy because it states clearly how sinful men can know God. It is undoubtedly the clearest statement of the divine plan for the redemption of men that God has been pleased to give us. If we had only the book of Romans, we would know most of what is essential to Christianity. This book satisfies the simple mind, and yet the most brilliant intellect cannot plumb its depths.

Every major revival in the two thousand years of Christianity has been directly or indirectly tied to the Book of Romans. Chrysostom had the book read to him twice a week, thinking that Romans was the apex of Christian truth. Luther was converted when he read Romans 1:17, “The just shall live by faith,” and from this came the Protestant Reformation. John Wesley was stirred to action when he heard a group of simple Christians discussing the book of Romans in a prayer meeting at Aldersgate in London. From this came the great Wesleyan revivals in England and America.

Law schools have been known to require their students to memorize Romans because of its masterful logic. Never has there been a book like Romans — it is profound in doctrine but extremely practical.

Martin Luther said concerning Romans:

“It is the true masterpiece of the New Testament, and the very purest gospel, which is well worthy and deserving that a Christian man should not only learn it by heart, word for word,

but also that he should daily deal with it as the daily bread of men's souls. For it can never be too much or too well read or studied; and the more it is handled the more precious it becomes, and the better it tastes."

David Brown said about the book:

"Not only every sentence teems with thought, but every clause; while in some places every word may be said either to suggest some weighty thought, or to indicate some deep emotion."

Dr. Francis L. Patten, the late president of Princeton University said:

"The only hope of Christianity is the rehabilitating of the Pauline theology. It is back, back, back to the incarnate Christ, and the atoning blood, or it is on, on, on to atheism and despair."

THE AUTHOR

It would be impossible to understand the heart beat of this epistle without understanding the background of the man who wrote it — Paul.

Before his conversion to Christ, Paul was known as Saul of Tarsus. He was a staunch Pharisee in the Jewish religion, and a good and sincere man. A Pharisee might go to the temple three times a day and pray seven times a day. Saul made every attempt to keep the Law of Moses, and he thought this would secure him a good standing in heaven. He was blinded by his religion and sincerity, for he was trying to gain merit with God by good works:

“If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless” (Phil. 3:4b-6).

He was so sincere about his religion that he had Christians persecuted and even murdered in the name of God:

“And I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women” (Acts 22:4).

“I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities” (Acts 26:9-11).

In all Saul’s religion and good works, he was a lost and condemned sinner, for he knew not that salvation is by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ. He was just like many of us today who are baptized church members. Some of us work in Sunday school and church, and think these things will bring merit before God. Those of us who think this way are trusting works rather than Christ for salvation.

Saul was one of the great intellects of his day. He spoke Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, and probably Latin. He was a Roman citizen, trained in Jewish philosophy and religion, and was well acquainted with the Greek

philosophers of his day: Platonians, Aristotelians, Epicureans, Stoics, etc. Saul was one of the best trained, outstanding men of his day, and had one of the finest minds. He was headed to the top in Judaism, and had he not become a Christian, he probably would have become a great leader in the Jewish religion.

Even with all his intellect, however, Saul was separated from God because of his sin. Just as Paul did, many people today use intellectual argument as a smoke screen to the deeper problem of sin.

Saul was also a zealot for what he believed. He was the greatest Jewish evangelist. He was sincere, but sincerely wrong, about the fact that his religion, zeal, and good works would fit him for heaven. His religion, zeal, and intellect were stumbling blocks to him so that he could not and would not accept Jesus Christ as the Son of God, the Sin bearer for his sins.

Jesus Christ sovereignly intervened in Saul's life to bring him from darkness to light, converting him to Christianity. This marked the great turning point in Paul's life, and he became the greatest Christian of all time. After his conversion, he was no longer called Saul, but Paul. Paul comes from Latin and means "little." Before salvation, he was known as Saul, a great man, but after salvation, he was Paul, the little saint. Contact with the living and resurrected Christ changed Paul's whole life!

The conversion of Paul is one of the strong arguments for the reality of the Christian faith. This young, zealous, brainy and talented Jew — who probably would have become the most powerful person in Jerusalem, and probably would have been famous throughout the Roman world — cast over everything to become a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ. God took Paul, a Jew who hated Gentiles, and made him the Apostle to the Gentiles.

He was a recipient of the grace of God. Apart from a supernatural new birth, there is no way to explain why Paul did what he did!

THE RECIPIENTS

The church at Rome was predominantly a Gentile church with only a handful of Jewish converts. Rome was the great commercial, military, and cultural center of the world — “all roads led to Rome.” People from all over the empire came there to establish businesses and to live.

It is thought that the church in Rome contained many of Paul’s converts who had trusted Christ before moving to Rome. This was true of Aquila and Priscilla: “Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus: who have for my life laid down their own necks: unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles” (Rom. 16:3-4). There were undoubtedly converts in Rome from the Day of Pentecost, and many had responded to Christ in that great city through the witness of the laymen who lived there.

As far as we know, no apostle had been to Rome before Paul wrote, and it is quite obvious that Paul himself had not been there:

“Now I would not have you ignorant, brethren, that oftentimes I purposed to come unto you, (but was let hitherto,) that I might have some fruit among you also, even as among other Gentiles” (Rom. 1:13).

“Yea, so have I strived to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man’s foundation” (Rom. 15:20).

Yet the church at Rome acknowledged Paul as their Apostle. This argues against the idea of Roman Catholicism that Peter was the first apostle to Rome.

Most of the converts in the church at Rome were probably from the middle class (business people). There were also some slaves, and some even of Caesar's household, yet they were all bonded together in Christ. Groups of believers gathered all over the city, meeting in various Christians' homes:

“Likewise greet the church that is in their house. Salute my well-beloved Epaenetus, who is the first fruits of Achaia unto Christ. . . Salute Apelles approved in Christ. Salute them which are of Aristobulus' household. Salute Herodion my kinsman. Greet them that be of the household of Narcissus, which are in the Lord. . . Salute Asyncritus, Phlegon. Hermas, Patrobas, Hermes, and the brethren which are with them” (Rom. 16:5,10,11,14,15).

THE TIME OF WRITING

The Book of Romans was written around A.D. 58. Paul had been a Christian for twenty years by that time. He had known and walked with the living and resurrected Christ for many years, was educationally, spiritually, and emotionally prepared to write this phenomenal epistle.

THE THEME

The theme of Romans is “Righteousness.” This is shown in verses 16 and 17 of the first chapter:

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.”

Romans shows us how a man guilty before God and under the penalty of sin can attain a righteousness that will make him acceptable before God. This righteousness is found in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The good news is that God will give a person righteousness that will make him acceptable to God. This righteousness is found in Christ alone, and a person must come to Christ to receive this free gift of righteousness.

The book may be outlined as follows:

1:1–3:20	Man’s need of righteousness
3:21-26	God’s provision of righteousness
4:1-25	By faith, man receives this righteousness
5:1-21	Jesus Christ is this righteousness
6:1–8:39	Righteousness can be experientially produced in the Christian by the Holy Spirit
9:1–11:36	Why Israel rejected this righteousness
12:1–16:27	Producing practical righteousness in the Christian life

CONCLUSION

As we proceed to study the book of Romans, we will benefit from it most if we read it in light of the gospel Paul and the other apostles proclaimed. Namely, if we believe on Christ, three things happen to us immediately:

- 1) We receive the forgiveness of sin: “In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace” (Eph. 1:7).
- 2) We receive Christ’s righteousness: “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor. 5:21).
- 3) We receive eternal life: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house” (Acts 16:31).