

An Introduction to Romans

According to the 16th century church reformer Philip Melanchthon, October 31, 1517, was the day a German monk named Martin Luther nailed his *Ninety-five Theses* to the door of the All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, in the Electorate of Saxony, in the Holy Roman Empire. The day later became celebrated by Luther's adherents as Reformation Day. Though modern historians have challenged the authenticity of Melanchthon's claim, and there are good historical arguments on both sides of the issue, that conflict is largely one for historians. Whether or not they were actually posted on the church door on that day as Melanchthon insisted, the fact that the *Ninety-five Theses* were eventually publicly read, published, translated, and communicated throughout Europe prompted an eruption in Christianity that continues to this day.

Why do we begin our study of Romans with this historical detail? Because the Reformation sparked by Luther's *Ninety-five Theses* remains the most fundamental shift in Christianity since the days of the early Church. And Luther's motivation in writing the *Ninety-five Theses* was his interpretation of the themes he found as he taught the book of Romans to his students at the University of Wittenberg.

So, to begin at the beginning, today we will look at the author as well as the literary and historical background of this profound biblical text, and hopefully we will begin to appreciate some of the many fine qualities it possesses.

The Author

The letter to the Romans begins, "Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God" (v. 1). Since the days of the early church, Paul has been understood to have been the writer of this letter. Early church Fathers such as Clement of Rome, Justin Martyr, and Polycarp claimed Pauline authorship for this letter. In addition, not only does Paul claim authorship for himself in the introduction, but the style and themes of the letter are consistent with the other known writings of Paul. Also, the biographical details in the letter, such as the claim to be of the tribe of Benjamin (Romans 13:1), and the claim to be the apostle to the Gentiles (Romans 11:13; 15:16-19), are consistent with what we know of Paul. Simply put, there is no doubt now, nor has there been any serious doubt in the past, that the apostle Paul is the author of the letter to the Romans.

Paul is an historical figure that is very familiar to most of us. From the testimony of both Scripture as well as extra-biblical historical sources, we know that he was born in the city of Tarsus (Acts 9:11), in what was then the capital city of a remote part of the Roman empire called Cilicia, and is today known as Turkey. Tarsus was a leading cultural center of the region and was home to one of the important universities of the Roman empire. In this very cosmopolitan city, Saul, as he was named at birth after the first king of Israel, was born into a strict Jewish family.

As Paul later described himself, he was "circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless" (Philippians 3:5-6). His Jewish pedigree was indisputable. In keeping with the expectations of a strict, and reasonably economically prosperous Jewish family, he was probably sent to Jerusalem after he turned thirteen, the age at which young Jewish boys

were recognized as men, and there he was educated under the great rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). There he studied the Talmud and other rabbinic traditions. At some point in his education, he chose to become a Pharisee, as an example of his strict commitment to adhere to the many details of the Jewish Law he was studying. His parents were undoubtedly very proud.

From his father, Saul had inherited Roman citizenship (Acts 22:28), a highly prized asset. This gave him social standing among the Greco-Roman citizens of the Roman world and complemented his high rank as a Pharisee among those of the Jewish community. He probably also inherited from his father his occupation of tentmaking (Acts 18:3). Though Paul and Jesus were contemporaries, since we have no record of Saul meeting Jesus during His earthly ministry, it seems likely that after completing his education in Jerusalem, Saul returned to Tarsus and took up a position there as one of the leaders of the local synagogue.

As he continued to increase in his position of authority at the synagogue in Tarsus, Saul probably began to hear of a new sect originating in Jerusalem where a man claimed to be the Messiah. This would have been deeply offensive to Saul, and others of his faith. Saul was apparently so motivated by this outrage, that he returned to Jerusalem to do what he could to destroy this new heretical movement. He was present at the execution of Stephen, the first recorded martyr of the Church (Acts 7:58), and he took part in the first great persecution of the local Church in Jerusalem. Scripture informs us that so enthusiastic was Saul that he “began ravaging the church, entering house after house; and he would drag away men and women and put them in prison” (Acts 8:3).

Inflamed by his passion to destroy this new sect, “¹Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, ²and asked for letters from him to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them in shackles to Jerusalem” (Acts 9:1-2). His position as a Pharisee and his zeal in attacking the members of this new sect had sufficiently impressed the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem that Saul was able to approach the high priest, himself, to request the opportunity to further persecute the followers of Christ. In other words, Saul was not content to limit his attacks on the Church to those in Jerusalem.

So since the persecution there had caused many followers of Jesus to flee to other regions of the Roman Empire, Saul had sought permission to hunt them down wherever he might find them. Having received the requested letters of introduction to the synagogues in Damascus, Saul began his journey there. The city of Damascus was the capital of the Roman province of Syria, and it was located about 150 miles northeast of Jerusalem. It was inhabited by some 150,000 persons in the early first century. The trip from Jerusalem to Damascus would have taken Saul about six or seven days, depending on the weather and its effect on travel conditions.

But it was on this journey that an event occurred that would transform Saul, and through him, the early Christian Church as well. As Saul recounted that momentous occasion in his testimony before King Agrippa,

“¹²as I was journeying to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, ¹³at midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who were journeying with me. ¹⁴And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a

voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ ¹⁵And I said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. ¹⁶But get up and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you as a servant and a witness not only to the things in which you have seen Me, but also to the things in which I will appear to you, ¹⁷rescuing you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, ¹⁸to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me” (Acts 26:12-18).

The risen and glorified Christ had appeared to this persecutor of the Church and informed him that he had been selected to be a witness of the gospel. Astonished and blinded, Saul was overwhelmed. When he recovered from the encounter, he obeyed and made his way to Damascus. As might be expected, the conversion of this militant persecutor of the Church was not as easily accepted by other members of the faith (Acts 9:13-14). But Saul began to prove himself. He preached in the very same synagogues in Damascus where he had been planning to attack Christians. And ²¹“all those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, ‘is this not the one who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?’ ²²But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 9:21-22).

In fact, so valuable did Saul become to the early Church, that his former allies, the Pharisees, sought to kill him. Consequently, Saul had to unceremoniously flee Damascus (Acts 9:23-25), and he eventually made his way to Arabia where he spent three years, likely receiving additional revelations from Christ (Galatians 1:17). After this time, he again returned to Damascus, where he stayed and preached for three more years. Finally, Saul made his way to Jerusalem and met with the leadership of the early Church (Galatians 1:18-19).

At this point the precise chronology of Saul’s life becomes murky, but we do know that he left Jerusalem and went first to Casarea and then on to Tarsus (Acts 9:29-30). He likely established many churches throughout his home region of Cilicia, and eventually he joined Barnabas in Antioch to minister there. From Antioch, Saul set off on his first missionary journey, beginning his unique, and God-given, ministry to the Gentiles of the Roman world (Acts 13:1-3). It was during this first missionary journey that the Scriptures first began to refer to Saul as Paul (Acts 13:13).

Provenance and Date

Because of the uncertain chronology of Paul’s life after he began his missionary journeys, it is difficult to precisely determine when Paul wrote the letter to the Romans. It is, however, a bit simpler to discover where he was when he wrote the letter. Beginning with Acts 13, Scripture outlines the three main missionary journeys taken by Paul after he left Antioch. The end of that sacred history recounts his final trip to Rome to plead his case before Caesar. On the third of these journeys, Paul traveled to Corinth, probably for the third time. There, in southern Greece, Paul began to collect an offering for the needy members of the churches in Palestine. While there, it is generally agreed that Paul wrote his letter to the church at Rome. Evidence for this is a note in his conclusion of his letter to the Romans, ²⁵“now, I am

going to Jerusalem, serving the saints. ²⁶For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem” (Romans 15:25-26).

In terms of the date of the letter, further evidence from the book of Acts suggests that Paul wrote the letter sometime in the spring, just before leaving for Jerusalem where he hoped to arrive before Pentecost. Again evidence from Luke’s account in Acts supports this. “For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus so that he would not have to lose time in Asia; for he was hurrying, if it might be possible for him to be in Jerusalem the day of Pentecost” (Acts 20:16). However, the exact dating of the third missionary journey has been disputed by biblical scholars, since the chronology of Paul’s life is so vague once he began his travels. But generally, it is agreed that the third missionary journey took place sometime during the mid-50s. Therefore, Paul likely wrote the letter to the Romans from Corinth as early as the spring of 55, or possibly as late as the spring of 58.

Purposes for Writing

As we have said, Paul wrote the letter to the church in Rome as he was about to leave with an offering from the churches in Macedonia and Achaia (Greece) for the churches in Palestine. From Jerusalem, Paul then hoped to go to Spain, and he was looking forward to visiting the church in Rome on his journey there. That is one of Paul’s purposes in writing his letter. He wanted to use it as a point of introduction, and to establish a relationship with this church that he hoped one day to visit.

The church in Rome was not one of the churches Paul had helped establish. In fact, despite his longings, he had never even visited there. Yet he had long hoped to see them, “¹¹that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established; ¹²that is, that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other’s faith, both yours and mine” (Romans 1:11-12). Paul recognized that, despite their best intentions, the church in Rome had not had the benefit of apostolic preaching. This was something else that motivated Paul as he wrote. He hoped to remedy their lack of understanding about specific theological and practical matters with his letter.

The church at Rome had probably been established by Jewish believers who had traveled there from Judea. They may have been present at Pentecost, experienced conversion in that extraordinary outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and then returned to their homes in Rome and begun to worship together. However, in 49 the emperor Claudius had expelled all of the Jews from Rome. Thus the church there became mainly Gentile, and it continued to develop over the next few years without any noticeable Jewish influences. As a result, within the church there was a lack of understanding about, and sensitivity to, Jewish thinking and practices.

Not surprisingly then, when Jews began to return to Rome at the end of Claudius’s reign, in 53-54, they found themselves in conflict with the local Gentile church leadership. Thus, Paul hoped to remind the church in Rome of the importance of the Jews as God’s chosen people and to encourage better understanding between Jewish and Gentile believers within the church. Therefore, Paul made special use of his background and training in the Old Testament and the Law as he wrote to the church in Rome. Remember that Paul’s education had immersed him in the literature of the Old Testament. So, throughout Romans, he made allusions to Old Testament writings. Among those Old Testament books he referred to

were Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, 1 Samuel, 1 Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Joel, Nahum, and Malachi.

Finally, we can also see that Paul also hoped to enlist their support for his ministry. This was not a financial plea, but rather he wanted the church at Rome to pray for him. As he concluded his letter to them, “now I urge you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me” (Romans 15:30). Thus Paul had many different motives for writing his letter to the church in Rome, and we will see each of these reasons addressed as we work through his letter.

General Outline

A general outline of the letter can be summarized as follows, (from *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*):

Introduction (1:1-15)

Theme - The Power of the Righteousness of God (1:16-17)

The Righteousness of Man, Human Sinfulness, and Justification by Faith (1:18-4:25)

The Benefits of the Gospel (5:1-8:39)

The Righteousness of God and Israel’s Rejection of the Gospel (9:1-11:36)

Practical Implications of the Gospel (12:1-15:13)

Conclusion (15:14-16:27)

Historical Impact

It would be difficult to overstate the impact of the book of Romans on the development of the Church. To take only a few examples from the pages of Church history:

The eminent Church Father, Augustine, was walking in the garden of a friend, when he heard a voice saying “take up and read.” He glanced around and saw a scroll containing the book of Romans. He read “¹³let’s behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and debauchery, not in strife and jealousy. ¹⁴But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts” (Romans 13:13-14). As he related the story in his *Confessions*, “no further would I read, nor did I need; for instantly, as the sentence ended - by a light, as it were, or security infused into my heart - all the gloom of doubt vanished away” *Confessions*, Book 8, chapter 12.

About a millennium later, a monk, ironically in a religious order named after St. Augustine, was teaching the book of Romans to his students at the University of Wittenberg, in the free state of Saxony, in what is today, modern Germany. As he wrote in the introduction to his commentary on Romans,

“this letter is truly the most important piece in the New Testament. It is the purest Gospel. It is well worth a Christian's while not only to memorize it word for word but also to occupy himself with it daily, as though it were the daily bread of the soul. It is impossible to read or to meditate on this letter too much or too well. The more one deals with it, the more precious it becomes and the better it tastes. Therefore I want to carry out my service and, with this preface, provide an introduction to the letter, insofar as God gives me the ability, so that every one can gain the fullest possible understanding of it” Luther, *Commentary on Romans*.

Two centuries later, an ordained minister in the Church of England was troubled about whether or not he had truly been saved. As he wrote in his journal,

“I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldergate street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for my salvation; and as assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death” John Wesley, *Journal*.

Paul's Description of Himself

The letter to the Romans begins, “Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God” (v. 1). Paul described himself, first and foremost, as a *doulos*, a word that is best translated not as “bond-servant” but rather as slave. Paul did not claim to be a great missionary, or profound theological thinker. He did not lift himself up as an expert in the Old Testament law, though he was that as well. To Paul, he always understood himself as being a slave of Christ. And as a slave of Christ, he had been assigned one task - to preach the gospel.

“¹⁵But when He who had set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through His grace was pleased ¹⁶to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles” (Galatians 1:15-16).

Paul clearly and accurately recognized his position. He was, as the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, put it, “a living tool.” Yet, he also understood there was an inherent dignity in serving in such a position. He was a slave to the immortal God, the Savior of the world. Like any slave in the ancient world, Paul measured his value by the value of the Master he served. And Paul served the King of Kings. Yet, Paul also understood that the dignity and high position of being a slave of Christ was a result of God's grace, not anything Paul had done. After touting his own credentials, Paul concluded that “⁷whatever things were gain to me, these things I have counted as loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them mere rubbish, so that I may gain Christ” (Philippians 3:7-8).

So realizing that Paul was a slave of Jesus Christ, it might be worth considering what were the characteristics of a slave in the Roman world. First, a slave belonged exclusively to one person.

“¹³Looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, ¹⁴who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for *His own possession*, eager for good deeds” (Titus 2:13-14, italics added). Like those 1st century slaves, Paul was owned by Christ and could not serve another master. Paul was “His own possession,” and Christ could do with Paul what He liked.

Second, the purpose of a slave was to work. “²¹For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ²²But if I am to live on in the flesh, *this will mean fruitful labor for me*” (Philippians 1:21-22, italics added).

Romans purchased slaves to do something. It might be to work in their fields, help with household chores, or even to tutor their children. But all slaves had a job. No one purchased a slave simply to have one. They were not merely ornamental. They all had something to do. And so did Paul.

Third, the master could simply expect unconditional obedience from his slaves. It defined their relationship. “³By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. ⁴The one who says, ‘I have come to know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 John 2:3-4). The master commanded and the slave, the good slave anyway, obeyed. The slave did not ask why or demand an explanation. The slave simply did what his master required of him. Likewise, Paul understood that he was to do what God commanded, not to call Him to account for the requirements He set before him or insist upon understanding His motives before he obeyed. Paul clearly knew he was a slave of Christ.

Paul also correctly understood upon Whose authority he acted. He had been “called as an apostle” (v. 1). That is, Paul did not seek the appointment of apostleship. Neither was he elected an apostle by his fellow believers. It was Christ Who had sought him out, and He had sought him out for this specific purpose. As Christ explained to Ananias, whom He had selected to care for the recently stricken Saul,

“¹¹the Lord said to him, ‘get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, ¹²and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight.’ ¹³But Ananias answered, ‘Lord, I have heard from many people about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴and here he has authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on Your name.’ ¹⁵But the Lord said to him, ‘go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel’” (Acts 9:11-15).

Saul was the “chosen instrument” of the risen Savior. As we have seen, Paul understood why he had been chosen.

“¹⁵And I said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. ¹⁶But get up and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you as a servant and a witness not only to the things in which you have seen Me, but also to the things in which I will appear to you, ¹⁷rescuing you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, ¹⁸to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me” (Acts 26:15-18).

Paul recognized that Christ had chosen him for the specific purpose of going to the Gentiles with the gospel.

Finally, Paul clearly understood the source of his power in fulfilling his mission. He had been “set apart” (v. 1). The setting apart by God for His purposes was a concept that dated back to the earliest times. When God gave the Law, He had clearly and succinctly stated His purpose. “You are to be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy; and I have singled you out from the peoples to be Mine” (Leviticus 20:26). Ironically, Paul had been a Pharisee, a group that had set themselves apart for their own glorification because of the high standards they had for keeping the Law. Now, however, Paul was acknowledging that it was God Who had set him apart.

And Paul understood that God had set him apart from before he was born. “He who had set me apart even from my mother’s womb and called me through His grace” (Galatians 1:15). And as we have been

saying, Paul was set apart for a specific purpose, and that purpose was “the gospel of God” (v. 1). Paul used the term *euangelion* some sixty times in his letter to the Romans. As he will elaborate later in his greeting to the church at Rome, this was the gospel, “²which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures, ³concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, ⁴who was declared the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead” (Romans 1:2-4).

Paul understood that he was a slave of Christ, who had been called by the Lord from before he was born to serve the Kingdom of God by preaching the Gospel to the Gentile populations of the Roman empire. Such a clarity of purpose was indispensable to his every action and compelled him to journey thousands of miles throughout the Roman Empire preaching the truth of Jesus Christ and establishing churches in His name. And Rome, at the center of the empire, must have seemed a perfect place to impart some of the wisdom Paul had gleaned from the risen Christ. Thus, to prepare for his visit there, he wrote them a letter, encouraging them in the faith, teaching them about the importance of the Jews, clarifying their theology, and giving them practical ways to live a life worthy of their calling as sons and daughters of the Most High God.

Takeaways

If we are a child of God, then we have something in common with Paul. Like him, we too have been chosen by God to be His slave and to serve Him and His Kingdom. Our task is likely different from Paul’s. But nonetheless, we all have a task. Remember that no Roman purchased a slave simply for pleasure. All slaves have a job to do, and it is our obligation to seek God and ask Him to reveal to us what our job is.

We might also begin our study of the letter to the Romans with a warning. Certainly it will become clear as we move through the text that this is the deep end of the theological pool. Therefore, we must be careful, prayerful, and attentive. No doubt to rightly understand the profound meanings of Paul’s work will require work. And, on the other hand, an over-familiarity with many of these same passages may lead us to be complacent, and cause us not to look at them afresh. Let us pray that we will be encouraged by the Holy Spirit to take the task set before us seriously, and to trust that He will use the book of Romans to edify, discipline, and encourage us.

And that is our motivation. Such a significant and impactful text of Scripture will repay our attention to detail. God has used this book to impact lives for two thousand years, and we have every reason to expect that He will continue to do so as we study Romans. Let us go forward in faith and confidence.