NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 48

Romans – Part One

An Overview

I. INTRODUCTION

Romans – the zenith of Paul's writings on the core of the Christian faith – reaches into the heart and mind of all who study it. It brought Luther to an understanding of salvation by faith that guided much of the Reformation movement. It gave clarity to Calvin and countless others who found a basis of righteousness before God that leans wholly upon him, rather than an individual. This is a letter that sets forward salvation as a theological truth as well as a practical reality. Paul writes of God's judgment, our righteousness, the fruitful Christian life, the advantages and promises of Judaism, the interplay between Jews and Gentiles, and the roles we play in God's kingdom.

Romans offers great insight into the character of God, the work of God, and the life of the saved. A good studious approach to the letter increases the harvest of truth for understanding the depths of the work of God on earth. Accordingly, we will study the letter in two ways: First, we will consider the background information that helps as we unfold much of the letter's contents from a broad perspective. Second, we will take the letter apart in large sections and try to underscore Paul's key points in a bit more detail.

A. Background

Most likely, Paul wrote Romans while in Corinth on his third missionary trip around the Spring of 57 A.D. (Acts 20:1-3). As Paul writes, he is staying with Gaius (Rom. 16:23), one of the few Paul baptized in his original stint in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:14). Paul has returned to Corinth after writing multiple letters, including 1 and 2 Corinthians found in the New Testament. We deduce that Paul was writing from Corinth from examining personal references in passages at the end of Romans. These passages reference not only Paul staying with Gaius, but also a woman named Phoebe and a man named Erastus.

Phoebe is mentioned in Romans 16:1, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Chenchrea. I ask you to receive her in the Lord…" This reference most likely indicates that Phoebe

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carried the letter to the church in Rome. Chenchrea was a port 6 miles from Corinth.

In Romans 16:23, Paul writes that "Erastus, who is the city's director of public works" sends his greetings. Archaeologists have uncovered a reused stone in a paved square in Corinth that reads, "Erastus, commissioner of public works, bore the expense of this pavement." This reference to a Christian seems to be the first outside the New Testament.

Acts gives a passing reference that Paul went on to Greece after going through Macedonia (where he wrote 2 Corinthians). In Acts 20:3, we read of Paul staying in Greece for three months at that point in his missionary trip. Put together, these facts indicate solidly that Paul was writing in Corinth, allowing us to date the letter with a fair amount of certainty.

B. The Church

History does not tell us specifically how the church at Rome was started. Many scholars assume that some of those in Jerusalem for Pentecost (when God established the church pouring our the Holy Spirit as Peter preached the first gospel sermon) started the church. We do know that at the time, thousands of Jews were living in Rome with at least seven synagogues and three cemeteries in the city (Tenney, Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, V at 170). We also know that some of these Jews were in Jerusalem for the Pentecost celebration recorded by Luke in Acts. Acts 2 noted among those in Jerusalem "visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism)" (Acts 2:10-11).

At one point in history, some taught that Peter started the church in Rome. The only extent to which that might be reckoned by most scholars (in or out of the Roman Catholic church) today is that Peter did in fact preach the initial sermon on Pentecost, opening the doors to the church. Most scholars agree that Peter himself did not make it to Rome until sometime after Paul wrote Romans. The church was already well established at the time Paul wrote.[1]

[1] Paul makes no reference to Peter in Romans, nor does Luke in the Acts history. Paul does note in Romans 15:20 that it had always been his "ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation." Tenney sees this notation as a confirmation of Paul's position not to minister actively in another's field of labor (Tenney at 169).

The Bible does not give us any direct insight into the church's formation. In addition to the reference to Pentecost, we know that the gospel went forth as the Jews persecuted the Christians in Jerusalem. In Acts 11:19, we read how Christians scattered as far as Cyprus and Antioch, albeit not as far as Rome. Still, those converted were on the move and would clearly take their faith with them. Ultimately, the origination of the Roman church is lost history.

We do know from Acts 18:2 that Priscilla and Aquila, apparently Christians at the time, left Rome because the Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome. Secular sources seem to date this around 49 A.D., consistent with the timing of Luke's narrative in Acts. Acts also lets us know that Priscilla and Aquila moved on to Ephesus and worked on the church there (Acts 18:19). This gives us some time perspective on the presence of Christianity in the world's capital.

Another area of interest to scholars (and to us as readers and students!) is the ethnic makeup of the Roman church. Scholars have debated whether the church at Rome was a "Gentile" or a "Jewish" church. Advocates of both positions are able to marshal support for their position from the letter. Paul's constant appeal to the Old Testament scriptures for his teaching indicates to some an obvious Jewish contingency of readers. Paul, however, also used the Old Testament with his Greek readers as well. The letter contains multiple references that indicate a Gentile audience. For example, in Romans 1:5, 6, and 13, Paul writes of himself as an Apostle to the Gentiles who looked forward to coming to Rome to harvest there for Christ as he had already with "other Gentiles."

Suffice it to say, the letter indicates both Jewish and Gentiles readers. Rather than try to pigeon hole the letter or church into a Gentile or Jewish label, there seems to be a more genuine explanation to the way Paul wrote. To uncover this, we need to examine the church within the history we can glean from other places in scripture and other history records.

Some interesting things likely occurred to the Roman church that not only explain the "Gentile/Jewish" dilemma, but also provide good insight into why Paul wrote the letter in the first place! We start by looking at Aquila and Priscilla.

In Acts 18:2, Luke explained why Aquila and Priscilla came to Corinth. Luke explained that the Roman emperor Claudius had expelled the Jews from Rome.[2] Assuming that the church was originally Jewish (from Pentecost), we may safely assume some interesting things would have happened when the Jews left Rome and the Gentiles had full reign over the congregation. No doubt, the Gentile Christians would have continued to worship and meet as a congregation. With the Jewish leaders gone, the Gentiles would have controlled and overseen the church.

Now, history does not tell us exactly when the Jews were allowed back into Rome. In 54 A.D. Claudius died (poisoned by his wife!) and his stepson, Nero (his wife's son by an earlier marriage), ascended the throne. It makes sense that any vanquishing of the Jews would have terminated at that time. In any event, we know that by the time Paul wrote Romans, the Jews had returned. In Romans 16, Paul writes for the Roman church to "greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus." So, they are clearly back in Rome at that point.

One can easily imagine the issues the church in Rome faced once the Jews returned to "their" church. There must have been some friction and difficulties as the original Jewish leaders returned to a church that had new Gentile leaders who had functioned fine in their absence. This explains why the letter is written as it is. Paul writes to set forth the clear basis for all the Jewish and Gentile Christians to understand their relationship, first to God and then to each other.

C. The City

Rome was the capital of the world. Tenney cites scholastic estimates of a population around 1 million at the time. Rome set the world's time and calendars. Dates were measured from the founding of Rome. Rome was the center of government and power. The Emperors ruled from Rome. Rome was the name given to the entire empire (the "Roman Empire").

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[2] Around 110 A.D. the pagan Roman historian Suetonius wrote a history of the Lives of the Caesars. In Section XXV, writing about Claudius, he noted, "Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome." "Chrestus" was an incorrect form of the Latin for Christ (proper form is "*Christus*").

In the midst of this city, the largest and greatest the day, the Christian faith was alive and thriving. Much of the Christian archaeology in Rome comes from times after Paul wrote this book. It is apparent that thousands and thousands of Christians were in Rome. There are ten generations of early Christians buried in the Roman catacombs. The numbers of Christians buried are estimated between 1.75 and 4 million for that first ten generations. Certainly, there were more Christians in the later generations, but the average of 175,000 to 400,000 Christians is still quite large.

Paul writes Romans during the reign of Nero. We know that after Rome burned in 64 (just seven years from Paul writing Romans), Christians were significant enough in number for Nero to try and blame them for the burning. A handful of Christians would not have even merited the Emperor's notice in a city of one million, much less have been a likely scapegoat in the public's eyes.

The Roman historian Tacitus (c.56 – c.120 A.D.) wrote in chapter xv of his Annals about Nero's blaming of the Christians. Tacitus noted,

> Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.

From this account, we see that the Christians, just 7 years out from Paul's writing, were "an immense multitude."

II. THE LETTER

Romans is the longest of Paul's epistles in the New Testament. We will outline the material in this class as follows:

1. Introduction and personal notes (1:1-17).
2. God's principles of judgment and the wrath of God (1:18-3:20).
3. Righteousness in the gospel (3:21-5:21).
4. Holy living for those saved (6:1-8:39).
5. Israel past and future (9:1-11:36).
6. The Christian life in practical terms (12:1-15:13).
7. Closing notes (15:14-16:27).

The over-arching theme of the letter is an explanation of humanity before God and God's righteousness. We have Paul explaining to Gentile and Jew how everyone stands before God without Jesus. Our standing before God on account of Jesus is then explained using the Old Testament to teach the gospel. Paul then explains the response of both Jew and Gentile to a born again life in the Spirit. The future for Jew and Gentile is then explained. Paul ends this letter with practical explanation of our Christian walk, especially as it pertains to the cultural differences between the Gentiles and Jews, followed by closing notes.

III. INTRODUCTION AND PERSONAL NOTES (1:1-17).

Paul begins his letter with a lengthy introduction of himself. Unlike 1 Corinthians, where Paul started merely with, "Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God," or 2 Corinthians, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God," Paul gives a loaded statement of himself as author. In Romans, his self-identification takes up 6 verses! Paul writes:

> *Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God – the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. (1:1-6)*

Only at this point does Paul move to identifying the recipients, "To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints" (1:7).

Paul lets us and his Roman readers know from the beginning that this is no ordinary letter! Paul is forecasting a letter that is rich in the Old Testament appeal to Christ and His work on our behalf. Paul begins emphasizing the centrality of the death and resurrection of Jesus to the truth of his identity as the promised Messiah and the Son of God. Paul also preludes his writing about the call that God has on our lives – a call to relationship and holiness.

Paul then sets out his desire to visit Rome. Paul notes that the faith of the Roman church is spoken of and known the world over (1:8-9). Paul constantly prayed for the church there, and he eagerly looked forward to a visit (1:10). Paul knew a visit would enrich both him and the Roman Christians. Paul wanted to come on numerous occasions but had not because of his work with "other" Gentiles (1:11-13). Paul recognized an obligation both to Gentiles and Jews that had kept him too occupied to make it to Rome yet. Paul was excited, though, to make it to Rome soon (1:14-15).

Paul then gives a central theme for the letter. Paul notes,

> *I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith." (1:16-17)*

As Paul wrote this letter from Corinth, we are reminded of 1 Corinthians 15 where Paul explained his meaning for the word "gospel" so clearly. We recall from those lessons how Paul used the term to reference the good news that Jesus died for our sins, was buried, but resurrected in power. So, when Paul writes this core passage in Romans, Paul sets out his theme for the letter that:

Paul has no shame over Jesus dying for him.
The death and resurrection of Jesus is how God saves all who believe.
In the death and resurrection, we see God's consistency (righteousness).
This righteousness of God is ours by faith, from the beginning to the end.
This is not new. It was written long ago in Old Testament scriptures.

This theme will reverberate over and over as we study this letter.

IV. POINTS FOR HOME

1. Get ready to focus on how we stand before God.
2. We are called to relationship.
3. We are called to obedience.
4. The death and resurrection of Jesus is our salvation.