

The Book of Romans Study Guide

Chapter 1

A strong case can be made that among all of the books of the New Testament, aside from the gospels, the book of Romans has played the most significant role in the formation of evangelical Christianity. If we were to sum up the book in one sentence, we might say that the Book of Romans explains that God's righteousness, revealed through the Good News (gospels), justifies all people who have sinned—both Jews and Gentiles—thus making them right with God through faith in Messiah Yeshua, leading to salvation and a transformed life that is empowered by the Spirit.

But rather than ending our study right there, we also need to know that the book of Romans has been used in unhelpful ways. The Protestant Reformation may have rightly reestablished the importance of salvation by grace through faith. But it also used Romans to create wrongly the notion of two distinct eras of law and grace. This distinction has also fueled the idea of that the New Testament is the book of Christianity, which then has spawned the claim that Jews who believe in Jesus become Christians and are no longer Jewish. That position has been championed by Judaism and has led to a further claim that Paul is the inventor of Christianity.

For those reasons, it is imperative to consider the book of Romans within a context that is consistent with a Jewish foundation, while also fulfilling God's declaration that through the Abrahamic Covenant, *all* the families of the earth would be blessed. In that regard, the book of Romans was written in the style of ancient midrashic literature, which is a genre of Jewish biblical interpretation that expands upon texts in the Tanakh/OT in order to explore their deeper meanings, while filling in narrative "gaps," and applying biblical principles to contemporary legal and ethical issues.

In the way of historical background, Paul wrote this book while he was staying in the Greek city of Corinth during the winter of 56–57 A.D. It was composed during the final stages of his third missionary journey. At this time, according to Acts 20:2-3, Paul had just spent three months in Greece and was preparing to travel to Jerusalem to deliver a collection of offerings for the poor. But before he did that, Paul wrote the epistle or letter to the Romans as a way of introducing himself to the believing community of Rome, which he had not yet visited, and to seek their support for a planned mission trip to Spain.

In order to understand his audience, we first have to consider what transpired in the second chapter of the book of Acts, which describes the events that transpired on the day of Shavuot/Pentecost fifty days after Yeshua's resurrection from the dead, and only ten days after His ascension into heaven, probably in the year 33 A.D. Because it was one of the three pilgrimage feasts in which the adult males of Israel had to be present at the temple, this chapter describes all of the regions that they came from.

Of particular note is the reference at the end of v. 10, which includes in the list: "visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes." That is a description of both native-born or ethnic Jews and Gentiles that had formally converted to Judaism. The Greek word *proselutos* literally means "one who has come over," and the Septuagint uses it to translate the Hebrew word *ger*, meaning "sojourner or alien." The only distinction between the Old and New Testament concepts is that the religious authorities of the second temple period required a series of steps in order to "come over"

to Judaism (circumcision, ritual immersion in a mikveh, and making a sacrificial offering).

But the point is that in Acts 2, among all of the regions listed, the author Luke, makes a unique emphasis for Rome in regard to the presence of both ethnic Jews and ethnic Gentiles on that day. And both of them became part of the 3,000 souls who believed in Yeshua on that day. And afterward, they would have returned to their homes in Rome and naturally started gathering together in congregations that met in houses, which meant the establishment of a mixed ethnic community of believers there. And then, that initial community of believers would have expanded with the addition of others who were Roman citizens or subjects without citizenship or slaves.

But then, 16 years later, that believing community experienced a traumatic event when, in 49 A.D., the Roman emperor Claudius expelled all of the Jews from Rome. That meant the believing Jews had to leave, while the non-Jews remained. And then, in the year 54 A.D., when Claudius died, his successor Nero allowed them to return, which created tension within the existing house churches that had become predominantly Gentile in the interim. That was two to three years before Paul wrote this letter, which was written, in part, to address the tension that had arisen. That is the key background to this book that is essential for understanding why Paul focuses on certain issues.

1:1-13

v 1 Although he never lost his Hebrew name Shaul/Saul, Paul consistently used his Greek name in his letters, since they were all written in Greek, the common language of the literary world. He uses two terms to identify himself:

- A servant/bondservant – Gr. *doulos* = literally “servant/slave,” but contextually implies a bondservant, which, in the Jewish culture, was a person who became an indentured servant due to debt, and then, at the end of the term of service when the debt was paid off, the person voluntarily decided to keep on serving the master for the rest of his life.
- An apostle – *apostolos*, literally “a sent one.” But, beneath this simple term is the Hebraic concept of a *shaliach* – a person who was empowered to act on behalf of a person with authority.

v 1-7 This is one sentence that sums up his reason for writing – namely that he serves Yeshua, who is the promised Messiah and through whom we receive grace and a calling upon our lives.

v 8-13 Paul describes one of his reasons for writing to the Roman believers. Remember, this is an actual letter, so it naturally deals with practical matters. In this case, it involves communicating his intention to visit them for the first time, so he expresses his appreciation for their faithfulness to him personally. And then, at the end of v. 13, he recognizes his responsibility to bring about good results for the kingdom of God, what he calls “obtaining some fruit,” in the same way that he had accomplished in other parts of the Gentile-dominant world.

1:14-20

v 14 Paul describes his obligation as an apostle to reach people with the same Good News and grace that he received. He refers to his audience as being “Greeks and barbarians,” but not in a literal sense, for he is using synonymous parallelism that is common in Hebraic writing, by

equating Greeks with people who are wise and barbarians with the foolish. In other words, this is about a message that applies to everyone.

- v 15 That explains his eagerness to preach the gospel.
- v 16 And, again he uses parallelism by saying that he is not ashamed of the gospel. And the reason that he was not ashamed of the gospel is that the good news of Yeshua has inherent power that changes lives through salvation from sin. Then, he punctuates that power by showing how it is not restricted to anyone. It is the same salvation for both Jews and Gentiles because we all share the same sin nature and that requires the same solution to sin—God's rescue for all who believe in Yeshua.

This is the first of two times that Paul uses the phrase, “to the Jew first and also the Greek.” It is a statement with both chronological and priority aspects. Yeshua brought the message of salvation first to His own Jewish people and then to Gentiles, and His disciples followed the same pattern. And, by making it a priority, it secures the continuity of the Abrahamic Covenant and the New Covenant, in which God promised in Jeremiah 31:36 to preserve the Jewish people as a nation before Him or in His presence as long as the universe exists.

- v. 17 He establishes the way that salvation is accomplished by quoting from Habakkuk 2:4, which states, “the righteous (KJV just) shall live by faith.” That means believers are not only saved by faith, but live daily by faith.
- v 18 Paul shows that he recognizes that the Gentiles of his day did not have the benefit of knowing what God's standards of righteousness were compared to the way that they had been revealed to the Jewish people in the Hebrew Scriptures. But he goes on to show that such ignorance does not give Gentiles an exemption from the wrath of God against all ungodliness and unrighteousness.
- v 19-20 And the reason is that there is evidence both within us, meaning our consciousness where we all have a sense of right and wrong, and in creation that testifies about God's invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature. Theologians call that general revelation that is available to all people. So, for that reason, all people are without excuse.

1:21-32

- v 21 Here Paul shows that, in spite of the opportunity to know God's existence and righteousness through general revelation, the tendency of humanity is not to honor it or give thanks for it. Instead, it is common to resort to speculations about things of a spiritual nature and for our hearts to become darkened.
- v 23 He begins describing things that people exchange and 3 resulting consequences. First, when people exchange the glory of the true, incorruptible God for corruptible man and idols. And let us recognize that we may not have actual idols in our homes, like people did in biblical times, but we certainly exalt people who are stars and celebrities and political leaders, and even popes.
- v 24 And, when people do that, God gives them over to the lusts of their heart, which is a way of saying that you will face the consequences of elevating man over God and believing in false religions that will fail you eternally.

v 25 The second kind of exchange is truth for a lie, which exalts the worship of creation.

v 26-27 And when people do that, God gives them over to degrading passions, most notably in the form of rejecting the God-ordained relationship of a man and a woman and replacing them with same sex relationships.

v 28 The final manifestation of rejecting God's general revelation is ceasing to acknowledge God's existence altogether. And when people do that, God gives them over to a depraved mind. The Greek word translated as depraved or reprobate (KJV) is *adokimos*, which literally means unapproved, and is enhanced with the phrase "not proper."

v 29-31 Paul then describes those unapproved and improper attributes.

v. 32 And he follows that up by saying such things are worthy of death. What he doesn't say here is that God has provided the rescue for humanity in the person of Yeshua, which will come later in the letter.