

# **THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS**

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## THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS

### **Introduction**

The Epistle to the Romans is unique in all the Scripture, for it contains the greatest and most thorough presentation and defense of the gospel in the entire New Testament.

- The term “gospel” occurs 10 times in this epistle, more than in any other of Paul’s letters except Galatians. The significance of this becomes evident when it is considered that the Galatian epistle is focused entirely on the gospel, having been written to address doctrinal and practical assaults against it by the Judaizing influence in the churches of Galatia.
- Paul’s commitment to, and insistence upon, the gospel is thematic in Romans, forming the foundational “bookends” for the epistle (cf. 1:1-4 and 16:25-27).
- Paul viewed himself as having been “set apart for the gospel” - an apostle of Christ whose obligation and profound privilege were the *proclamation* of the gospel and the *establishment* of the saints in it (1:9, 15:15-21; cf. also 1 Corinthians 1:10-24, 9:13-23). So also Paul shared the same burden for the saints at Rome.

### **Background of the Epistle**

1. One of the importance aspects of his Roman epistle is that it was written to a Christian community with whom Paul had had no personal interaction. Unlike many of the first century churches, Rome had been evangelized and a fledgling Christian church had been established there apart from any ministry on Paul’s part (cf. 1:9-13, 15:18-29).
2. Despite Paul’s lack of personal ministry among the saints at Rome, he had no doubt concerning their legitimate embrace of the gospel and their conversion to Christ (1:7-8, 12:1-5, 16:1-2, etc.).
3. The time of the epistle’s writing is evident from the internal witness of the letter itself. Paul states that he wrote it immediately preceding his trip to Jerusalem to bring the Gentile offering he had collected to the struggling Jewish Christians there (15:25-27). This statement means that he penned it near the end of his third missionary journey after he had completed the collection.

He also noted in his greetings at the end of the epistle that he was being *hosted* by a man named Gaius (16:23). Since his visit to Corinth during his third missionary trip was to collect their contribution toward the Jerusalem offering, and there was a believer at Corinth named Gaius, it is likely that Paul wrote the Roman epistle during his three-month stay there (cf. Acts 20:1-3; 1 Corinthians 1:14-15, 16:1-6; 2 Corinthians 8-9).

## Purpose for the Epistle

The Epistle to the Romans is unique in that it is at the same time a thorough and methodical *doctrinal correspondence* and a *pastoral exhortation* to the members of a particular first century congregation.

- Its systematic presentation of sweeping doctrinal content has caused many to conclude that Paul intended it to be received by the church at Rome as a doctrinal treatise by which they would be advanced in their knowledge of the faith.
- Others have insisted that its practical content and local church destination mean that it should be viewed as having been written for primarily pastoral reasons.
- Still others note its missions emphasis, the epistle having been sent by Paul to the Romans in view of his anticipated future missionary work in Western Europe. They argue that, inasmuch as he intended to stop in Rome on his way to Spain, and was hopeful that the Roman Christians would contribute to his support for his journey, he felt it necessary to write to them in advance in order to make sure they understood his gospel and would be receptive to him when he arrived.

All of these emphases and resultant conclusions have some support, and they are not, in the absolute sense, mutually exclusive. That is, it is possible that each of these alleged purposes for the epistle may indeed be a part of Paul's overall reason for writing. Some further observations help to make a final determination.

1. First of all, Paul openly insisted that he fervently desired to come to Rome and *preach the gospel to them* (1:11-15). The way in which he stated his desire clearly indicates that he had a purpose beyond simply presenting his doctrinal platform and "credential" in order to successfully gain the monetary support of the Romans as he moved on to Spain. Indeed, his desire in preaching the gospel to them was their *spiritual benefit*; he longed to see them in order to impart some spiritual gift to them so that they would be established (1:11-15).

- a. Paul's stated desire lends credibility to those who insist that his reason for writing was pastoral. At the same time, it helps to explain the broad doctrinal content of the epistle. That is, laying out and developing the various facets of the gospel as he did would have served to establish in the minds of the Romans why Paul was so eager to preach the gospel to them.

Further, a pastoral emphasis does not preclude a secondary missionary purpose for the epistle. For the same gospel by which Paul hoped to establish the Romans was the gospel he longed to take to the ends of the earth, and it was perfectly appropriate that he would expect that, themselves having been established in it, the saints at Rome would be eager to see the same fruit produced in the lives of others.

- b. What is crucial to note about this first observation is what it reveals about Paul's perception of the gospel, namely that it is as vitally necessary to the *believer* as to the unbeliever. So many Christians tend to associate the preaching of the gospel solely with evangelism, and they see no role for it in the lives of those who have already come to Christ. Such was not the case with Paul, *for he longed to preach it to those who had already embraced it in saving faith.*

To Paul, the gospel is not only for the unconverted; *it is the marrow of the understanding and the very lifeblood of the practical living out of the faith of God's saints.* Paul understood the gospel to be the power of God for salvation in all of its aspects. It not only serves the end of conversion, it is essential to the sanctification that yields the final salvation that is to come in the renewal of all things.

Paul's longing for the Romans was that they be **established** in the gospel (1:9-15, 16:25-27). They had been converted to Christ in the faith of the gospel, *but it was equally necessary that their Christian lives be firmly and fully established by and in it.* He had all confidence in their conversion, but as Christ's minister of the gospel on behalf of the Gentiles Paul longed to see them grow in their sanctification, and he knew that the gospel was the key to that work of grace.

2. A second observation implied by the former one is the *centrality of the gospel* to the content and theme of the epistle. Whatever Paul's ultimate reason(s) for writing to the saints at Rome - whether doctrinal, pastoral, or missionary - it had the gospel at its heart. For Paul's doctrinal instruction was instruction in the doctrine of the gospel; his pastoral concerns for the Roman church were addressed in terms of the gospel; his missionary designs derived from his burden for the gospel and his apostolic obligation to it as conferred upon him by Christ.
3. Finally, as previously noted, Paul's future intention was *to take the gospel to Spain*, and that missionary endeavor was the reason for his anticipation that he would be coming to Rome and ministering the gospel to them. Because charges of blasphemy and heresy accompanied him everywhere he went, it is possible he wanted the Romans to have confidence that he was indeed preaching the true gospel as Christ's apostle to the Gentiles. This was all the more important for the reason that he had had no personal ministry among the Roman believers, and most likely they were well aware of his notorious reputation (15:14-24).

These observations add insight into the reason Paul wrote the Roman epistle. Having purposed a visit to Rome on his way to Spain, Paul was writing to lay the groundwork for his planned gospel ministry among them, as well as through them to other peoples. *In this Paul's singular focus upon the gospel is powerfully evident.* Whether with regard to the firm establishment of the saints, the advance of Christ's kingdom among the nations, or Paul's own edification as a Christian, the good news of the gospel was fundamental.

## Recipients of the Epistle

The internal witness of the epistle testifies that it was written to “*all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints*” (1:7). While this identifies the recipients as the body of believers residing in Rome, it leaves open another important question, namely the *composition* of that body. For whether the church at Rome was predominately Jewish, Gentile, or a combination of both influences the way in which this epistle is to be read. What is immediately apparent is that the Roman congregation was comprised of both Jews and Gentiles.

The epistle’s introduction clearly identifies the church as substantially *Gentile* (1:1-6). This is further substantiated by the extended exhortation to unity in chapters 14 and 15 that addresses the matter of the “weaker brother.” As well, Paul’s discussion of Israel is directed primarily toward the Gentile believers at Rome and how they were to view the “Jewishness” of their Israelite brethren and the future of the Jewish people (11:1-32).

Yet the very call to unity in matters associated at least in part with the Law of Moses reveals that the church contained *Jewish* members. This is made all the more evident by Paul’s extensive discussion of Israel’s place in God’s purpose in salvation history. And finally, it is supported by his statements concerning Abraham and the previous role of the Mosaic Law in the lives of his readers (cf. 2:17-25, 4:1-25, 6:11-7:6, 9:1-11:32, etc.). As well, both history and the biblical record indicate that Jews were among the very first converts at Rome. An early church father records that Christianity in Rome had its origins in the Jewish synagogue, and Priscilla and Aquila, who apparently were Christians at the time Paul met them, were expelled from Rome during Claudius’ general expulsion of all Jews (Acts 18:1-3; cf. Romans 16:3-4).

During the period of Claudius’ short-lived expulsion the church at Rome would have been entirely Gentile, with the exception of those Jewish Christians who were able to escape detection. Later, when Jews were allowed to return to Rome (note again Romans 16:3-4), the Jewish Christians would have found the Gentile church in their city very different than the one they left, and their reunion with the congregation there evidently brought about some of the tensions and difficulties addressed by Paul in this epistle. In the end it must be concluded that Paul wrote his letter to the church at Rome fully conscious of its mixed population. In fact, much of the content of his correspondence with them addresses issues specifically related to the Jew/Gentile dynamic.

## Theme of the Epistle

As might be expected, the theme of Romans has been contested through the centuries. It contains several distinct elements of emphasis, many of which have been put forth as the primary theme. The following are but a sampling.

1. Many have held that the overarching theme of Romans is the doctrine of *justification by faith*. This doctrine is overtly central to chapters 4-7, is anticipated in the preceding chapters, and is presumed in the succeeding ones.

For this reason it is not difficult to understand how it would be viewed as thematic. There is no doubt that it is *a* theme of the epistle, but it is too narrow to view it as the overarching theme.

2. Others have concluded that the central theme is *sovereign election as the basis of salvation*. This is supported by the portrait of depravity developed in the first three chapters, the covenantal surety of the believer that stands upon God's foreknowledge and predestination in chapter 8, and particularly Paul's treatment of the Jew/Gentile question in chapters 9-11. As before, it is undeniable that this constitutes one thematic element of the epistle, but it is not the primary theme.
3. Another view is that Paul's fundamental theme is the *doctrine of the Christian life*, especially considered in terms of union with Christ and the fellowship of His Spirit as sons of God (note esp. 8:1-39, 12:1-15:13).
4. Another consideration is that the epistle's theme is to be found in the *practical issues in the church at Rome*. Paul does address some local issues, most notably how a predominately Gentile congregation is to view its Jewish constituency and vice versa. This is arguably the heart of Paul's practical instruction in chapters 14 and 15. But once again, this thematic emphasis is too narrow to rightly constitute the fundamental theme of the epistle.
5. One final view is much broader, and maintains that Romans is to be viewed thematically as a *treatise on the great doctrines of Christianity*. This has led some to refer to it as a "mini-Bible," and others to regard it as a concise work on systematic theology. While such conclusions may in some sense apprehend the orderly, systematic *content* of the epistle, they tend to minimize or overlook the historical background and epistolary purpose for that content. *The epistle to the Romans is first of all a pastoral letter to a congregation of Christians, and so it cannot be viewed foundationally as a treatise on systematic theology*. Further, painting its theme with such broad strokes provides no real thematic insight.

When, along with Paul's own stated concerns (1:13-17, 16:25-27), these thematic elements are considered with respect to their logical sequencing in his argument, it is evident that the theme of Romans is the *gospel*. This theme not only embraces each of the above sub-themes, it allows them to be seen and correlated in their proper relation.

This being the fundamental theme, the most proper way to view the epistle to the Romans is as a broad and practical *primer* on the gospel. For it lays out in orderly and methodical fashion the foundational truths of the gospel and shows how they are to be reflected in the thinking and practical living of the redeemed and regenerated children of God. With this appraisal Luther was in full agreement: "*This epistle is the real chief part of the New Testament and the very purest gospel, which, indeed, deserves that a Christian not only know it word for word by heart but deal with it daily as with daily bread of the soul. For it can never be read or considered too much or too well, and the more it is handled, the more delightful it becomes, and the better it tastes.*"