

Introduction to Romans

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There is a difference, both of atmosphere and method, in Paul's writing to the Romans, compared to his other letters. He was writing to a church with whose founding he had nothing whatever to do with, as well as no personal contact. That is why there are so few of the details of practical problems which fill the other letters. That is why, at first sight, it seems so much more impersonal.

Romans comes nearest to being a theological treatise. It is as if Paul was writing his theological last will and testament, distilling the very essence of his faith and belief. Romans has been referred to by one scholar as "prophylactic," which is something which guard against infection. He wished to send to the church in the city that was the centre of the world a letter which would so build up the structure of their faith that, if infections should ever come to them, they might have in the true word of Christian doctrine a powerful and effective defence.

Written in the year AD 58, his desire to see Rome breathes out.

The church at Jerusalem was the parent church of all the churches, but it was poor. Paul had organized a collection throughout the younger churches for it. That collection was two things. It was an opportunity for his younger converts to put Christian charity into Christian action, and it was the most practical way of impressing on all Christians the unity of the Christian Church, of teaching them that they were members not of isolated and independent congregations, but of one great Church, each part of which had a responsibility to all the rest.

In Rome there was Seneca, the Roman orator and Seneca, the greatest of the Roman Stoic philosophers, tutor of Emperor Nero. What might happen if people like that could be touched for Christ.

Paul was a supreme strategist. Like a great commander, he needed a base for operations. There was only one such base possible—and that was Rome.

That was why Paul wrote this letter to Rome, hoping, after receiving it, he might find in Rome a sympathetic church.

Romans falls into four definite divisions:

1. Chapters 1-8 deal with the problem of righteousness.
2. Chapters 9-11 deal with the problem of the Jews, the chosen people.
3. Chapters 12-15 deal with practical questions of life and living.
4. Chapter 16 is a letter of introduction for Phoebe, and a list of final personal greetings.

1. Righteousness means a right relationship with God and a life that shows it. Paul finds the way to righteousness in the way of complete trust and total submission. The only way to a right relationship with God is to take Him at his word, and to cast ourselves, just as we are, on His mercy and love. It is the way of faith. It is to know the important thing is not what we can do for God, but what He has done for us. The whole matter is one of grace, accepting in wondering love and gratitude and trust what God has done for us. We must forever try to be worthy of the love which does so much for us, not fulfilling the demands of condemnatory law, but giving and receiving love.
2. Somehow the hearts of the Jews had been hardened when they rejected God's son, but there had always been a faithful remnant. Nor was it for nothing, for the very fact that the Jews had rejected Christ opened the door to the Gentiles. Paul insists that the real Jew is not someone whose flesh-and-blood descent can be traced to Abraham but someone who has made the same decision of complete submission to God in loving faith that Abraham made. The new Israel was not dependent on race at all; it was composed of those who had the same faith as Abraham had had.
3. Romans is the ethical statement of the Christian faith and must always be set alongside the Sermon on the Mount. Chapters 14 and 15 deal with faith dependent on external matters. No one must ever do anything which makes it

harder for someone else to be a Christian—and that may well mean the giving up of something, which is right and safe for us, for the sake of the weaker brother or sister.

4. Chapter 16 has always presented scholars with a problem. Many have felt that it is really a letter to some other church, which became attached to Romans when Paul's letters were collected. The grounds are that Paul sends greetings to twenty-six different people, twenty-four of whom he mentions by name and all of whom he seems to know very well indeed. Is it likely that Paul knew them so well in a church which he had never visited? If it wasn't written to Rome, what was its original destination? We know Prisca and Aquila left Rome in AD52 when Claudius issued his edict banishing the Jews. We know that they went with Paul to Ephesus. It may have been sent to Ephesus in the first place; Paul spent longer there than anywhere else. He talks about difficulties, in opposition to the doctrine which you have been taught (Romans 16:17) which sounds as if Paul was speaking about possible disobedience to his own teaching—and he had never taught in Rome. There are no personal greetings in Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians and Philippians, all of them letters to churches Paul knew well, whereas there are personal greetings in Colossians, although Paul had never set foot in Colossae. The reason is really quite simple. If Paul had sent personal greetings to churches he knew well, jealousies might have arisen; on the other hand, when he was writing to churches he had never visited, he liked to establish as many personal links as possible.

We must remember, as we study Romans, that Christians have always looked on Romans embodying the very essence of Paul's gospel.