

“Introduction to Romans”  
(Romans 1:16-17)

This morning, I would like for us to begin looking at what is considered the greatest of the New Testament letters, the letter of Paul the apostle to the Romans. Of course, all of the New Testament letters are important. The Lord providentially ordained the circumstances in each of the churches at that time, as well as sovereignly shaped the lives of each of the authors who would write to them, watching over them at each step by His Spirit, so that they would write precisely what He wanted them to. Through this process we call inspiration, the Lord has given to us everything we need to know for life and godliness. There are so many professing Christians today who want the Lord to speak directly to them, to tell them what they are to do, and even expect that He will do so – really, that He must do so – because they don’t believe there’s any where they can go to find out what His will is. But by saying this they reveal that they either don’t know or believe that He has already given them these answers in His Word. They just haven’t read it or studied it, or found those who have, so that they could ask them. Now it’s true that God hasn’t answered all of our questions in His Word, such as where we should live, where we should work, or even that all important question that our youth often ask, whom should I marry? But He has given us everything we need to make godly choices in all of these areas, as well as everything that we need to believe about Him. We just need to be more diligent in studying His Word to learn the answers, as Paul exhorted Timothy, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15). The fact that the Lord has given us such a wealth of information is what makes the Bible so important in general, and the letters of the New Testament so important in particular, and Romans is certainly no exception to that rule.

What I would like to do this morning is give you a little background on this letter Paul wrote so many years ago to the church at Rome – when he wrote it, to whom he wrote it, and why he wrote it. I would also like to show you briefly some of the important questions that we can expect to find the answers to in this letter, which will be helpful to us now in living the life God calls us to, as well as in preparing ourselves for the great day of His judgment. First, let’s consider the background of this letter.

First, it’s obvious that the apostle Paul wrote this letter. He identifies himself as the author in the very first verse, “Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.” It’s equally clear that this letter was written to the saints in Rome. We read in verse 7, “To all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints.” But when was this letter written? Apparently, it was written on Paul’s third missionary journey. You will remember that in his zeal to bring the Gospel of God’s grace to the whole Roman Empire, Paul set out a total of three times to evangelize. This was possible because of the peace the empire enjoyed under Rome’s dominion, a peace that lasted many years, called the *Pax Romana*, or the peace of Rome. The first journey was relatively short. Paul set out from Antioch with Barnabas and John Mark, first traveling to Cyprus, then to a few cities just inland off the coast of Asia Minor, and then back to Antioch. The second journey began after the Jerusalem Counsel. After they took

the decree decided on by the Counsel back to Antioch and read it to the congregation there, they decided to go back to see how the churches were doing in the cities they had visited. This time Paul went with Silas, instead of Barnabas. The date was about A. D. 51. They went further this time, however, into Phrygia and Galatia. Then they went across to Macedonia, down into Corinth, and then back to Jerusalem, and finally to Antioch. After some time, Paul left on his third missionary journey, in which he again basically retraced his steps to visit the churches he founded, concluding his journey in Jerusalem around A. D. 58. From what we read in the letter to the Romans, it's most likely that Paul wrote it on this last journey. His prayer in chapter 15:30-33 shows that he was concerned about his coming trip to Jerusalem. If this was his third journey, it would be time when he would be arrested, placed on trial and eventually sent to Rome, as the Spirit of God had warned him (Acts 20:22-23). Paul, in this letter, also had his eye on Spain, hoping to stop in Rome to visit that church on the way (vv. 24, 28). He wanted to go where Christ had not yet been named (v. 20), because by this time, he had already evangelized most of the Mediterranean, from Jerusalem to Illyricum, which is Northwest of Macedonia (v. 19). This tells us that most of his missionary work was already done, which would be true of his Third Missionary Journey. It's very likely then that Paul wrote this letter on his third journey, around A. D. 57. It's also very likely that Paul wrote it while staying in Corinth. Luke tells us that he spent about three months in Greece (Acts 20:3). In the letter to the Romans, he commends Phoebe, who is a servant of the church, which is in Cenchrea, which is a neighboring city to Corinth. Gaius, who was Paul's host at this time, is also mentioned as sending his greetings. He is probably the same Gaius Paul says he baptized in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:14).

This answers the question as to where and when the letter was written. Let's consider for a moment to whom it was written. Who were these Christians at Rome, and how did this church get started, since apparently Paul had not reached Rome by this time? First of all there's no doubt that there was a church established at this time in Rome. The letter is addressed "To all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints" (1:7). But there's really isn't anything definite about how they got there. We do know that around A. D. 180, Irenaeus wrote that Peter and Paul founded that church. Later tradition, however, indicates that Peter alone founded it and was its first bishop. But neither of these things are likely to be true (Carson 242). Paul tells us in this letter that he had never been there. He says in chapter 1, verse 13, "And I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented thus far) in order that I might obtain some fruit among you also, even as among the rest of the Gentiles" (Cf. 1:10; 15:22). It's equally unlikely that Peter had established this church. There's no evidence that he had, and it's very doubtful whether Paul would have been so intent on going there, if Peter had. Paul's continual desire was "to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, that [he] might not build upon another man's foundation" (Rom. 15:20). Well then, if neither Peter nor Paul planted this church, who did? It's most likely that Christianity was brought to Rome by some of the Jews who were converted on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10). After they had been discipled, they returned to Rome where they established a church. We would also have to assume from this letter that it wasn't long before some of the Gentiles in Rome were also converted to Christianity through their testimony. At one point, the Gentiles might have even been the largest group in the church, at the time Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome,

leaving the church in the hands of the Gentile believers (Acts 18:2). It certainly appears that Paul addresses both groups, both Jewish and Gentile Christians, which may be why Paul will admonish them in the letter to “accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God” (Rom. 15:7) (Carson 243).

We have seen that Paul probably wrote this letter on his third missionary journey from the city of Corinth, and that he wrote it to the Jews who had established a church in Rome – who had been converted in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost – and to the Gentile believers who were subsequently converted through their testimony. The last question I want us to look at is why did Paul write this letter to the Romans? The interesting thing here is that Paul doesn’t really tell us. In many of his letters, he writes to address specific problems, but here he doesn’t. All he talks to them about is why he wants to come to them. All we can do, then, is look at the contents of the letter to see what he wrote, to determine why he wrote. Without going into all the debates there are on this subject, it’s simplest to say that Paul’s overall purpose is to declare to them the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Romans is his statement of the Gospel and how it relates both to the Jew and the Gentile. When you really stop to think about it, the church at Rome wasn’t directly established by an apostle, but only indirectly by their converts taking the Gospel to Rome. It may be that the Lord had Paul write them this letter so that they might have a more accurate understanding of what it was, so that they might know how much they were indebted to God’s mercy for it. We are often converted with a less than perfect understanding of the Gospel, only to be brought to a place later, by our Lord’s grace, where we can learn it more accurately. And since this letter isn’t tied as strongly to any particular set of circumstances, it’s easier to understand and to apply to our situation today (249-255). Consider again the theme statement of the letter to the Romans. Paul writes, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘But the righteous man shall live by faith’” (1:16-17). This letter is simply Paul’s explanation of the Gospel, which makes it, of course, very valuable to us today.

Having seen that the letter was written during the time of Paul’s third missionary journey, to the Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome, to help establish them in the fundamentals of the Gospel, let’s consider in closing a few of the questions that this letter sets out to answer. I really only have time to suggest some of the questions now. In the next several months, we’ll see how Paul answers these questions. Some of the things we can expect to see the answer to are: How does God save His people? Why does God pour out His wrath on men even though they haven’t had the chance to hear the Gospel? What is the real cause of idolatry? Of homosexuality? Of all sin? What is the basis upon which God will judge all men? Do those who don’t have God’s Law have an excuse? Is there really anyone who doesn’t have God’s Law? Who really is a Jew? Did the natural Jews have any advantage at all in the things of the Lord? Is there anyone who is truly good? What happened to the Old Testament believers before Christ came? Were they forgiven? Were they saved? How were they saved? How can a man be justified in the eyes of God? What was our relationship to God before we believed? How did Christ change that? How did we all become sinners in the first place? Once we come to Christ, does that mean we no longer need to fight against sin? What has Jesus done to help us in our war against it? What is our relationship to the Covenant of Works? How did the

Law help us to come to Christ? After we come to Christ, what does the Law continue to tell us about our hearts? What is the Spirit of God able to do for us that the Law never could? What will happen to us if we continue to obey our sinful desires? What will happen if we obey the Spirit? What kind of encouragement does the Lord give to us to help us endure the sufferings we must face in this life? What help does He give us in prayer? What does God promise will be the outcome of all of our sufferings? Is it possible for a true believer to be lost? What is God's plan for natural Jews? Why did some Jews believe and others not? Why do some believe today and others not? What must a Jew do to be saved? What has God done to bring His elect Jews to Himself? Now that we have received the mercy of God in Christ, what does the Lord want us to do? What is our responsibility to each other? To our enemies? To the government? To our weaker brother? As I said, Paul gives us the answers to several very important questions. Now I know that we already know the answer to several of these, because we've read this letter before, perhaps several times, or other parts of Scripture which deal with the same topics. But there's always something new for us to learn and to be thankful for, as we consider the height and depth of God's love and mercy to us in Christ. And so let's set our hearts to study this letter, that we might know God's grace better, live it more fully, and be the means of bringing it to those who know nothing about it. Amen.