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INTRODUCTION TO ROMANS

*Author and date of writing*

The Bible contains 13 letters of Apostle Paul, and Romans, his longest one, is placed first in the New Testament. Many scholars believe he wrote Galatians and 1 & 2 Thessalonians the earliest (between AD 48–51), and his prison epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon) and pastoral letters (1 & 2 Timothy, Titus), the latest (between AD 62–67). He probably wrote Romans in AD 57, right after writing 2 Corinthians. It was at the end of his third missionary journey while he was in Corinth for three months (Acts 20:1–3 English Standard Version) and on his way to Jerusalem to take an offering from the Gentile churches (Rom 15:25,26).

*The church in Rome*

Unlike most of the other churches mentioned in the New Testament, Paul had never been to Rome, but a community of Christians was there, which leaves us wondering how it got started. According to Acts[[1]](#footnote-1) 2:5–11, there were “…visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes…” in Jerusalem at Pentecost when God first sent the Spirit on the early believers. These people must have heard Peter’s first gospel message and been among those who repented, believed in Jesus and were baptized (Acts 2:14–41). After the Feast, as they went back to Rome they must have continued on their own to live out their newfound faith in Jesus. Over 15 years later, in AD 49, the Roman Emperor Claudius issued a decree to have all the Jews in Rome banished (Acts 18:2), due to, as some ancient historians have written, “a controversy about Chrestos,” probably meaning “Christ.”[[2]](#footnote-2) It suggests that these Roman Christians were engaged in explaining their faith in Jesus to others and experienced a backlash of persecution.

Though he had never been there, according to chapter 16 Paul knew many of the Christians in Rome. His fellow workers Prisca and Aquila, who had been among those expelled, were now in Rome again, having a church meeting in their house (Acts 18:1–3; Rom 16:3–5). One of Paul’s Gentile converts from Asia, Epaenetus, was now in Rome (Rom 16:5b), as were a Jewish Christian couple Andronicus and Junia, Paul’s kinsmen, who once had been his fellow prisoners and “were in Christ before” him (Rom 16:7). Some other fellow workers, kinsmen and beloved friends of Paul were now also living in Rome (16:8,9,11,12,13).

*Purpose in writing*

*Prologue*: In the letter’s opening Paul vows before God that he had always been praying for the believers in Rome without ceasing and asking that he might at last succeed in coming to them (Rom 1:8–10). This fervent prayer probably began after his ministry in Ephesus, when Paul suddenly said, “I must also see Rome” (Acts 19:21b). Paul wanted to impart to the Roman believers “some spiritual gift to strengthen [them],” and he was inspired to “reap some harvest among [them] as well as among the rest of the Gentiles” (Rom 1:11,13).

*Paul’s experience in Ephesus*: To understand where Paul’s fervent prayer and vision were coming from, we have to take a look at what happened in Ephesus (Acts 19:1–10). It was a major city in the Roman Empire, and many people from the province of Asia Minor had to travel there regularly for business, legal or religious reasons. At first Paul tried ministry in Ephesus at a Jewish synagogue, as was his custom. But due to opposition, he moved with his disciples to a place called “the lecture hall of Tyrannus,” where he was “reasoning” with people daily. Acts 19:10 says, “This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.” These disciples shadowing Paul most likely became overseers in this new Ephesian church and grew as its shepherds (Acts 20:28). If such a work of God could happen in a city like Ephesus, Paul reasoned, how much more could the gospel spread through a vibrant, growing, mission-minded church in Rome, the capital city of the entire Empire.

*Concluding comments:* At the end of Romans Paul shares his plan to visit them briefly, enjoy their company for a while, then go on to Spain, “not where Christ has already been named, lest [he] build on someone else’s foundation,” as he was hoping for their help for his journey there (Rom 15:20,23,24). He also invites them to “strive together” with him in their prayers to God on his behalf so that he could safely deliver the Gentile churches’ offering to Jerusalem (Rom 15:30–32). He was hoping the Christian community in Rome would gain the spiritual strength to be a supporting base for the gospel to keep spreading to more and more people, “both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish” (Rom 1:14,15).[[3]](#footnote-3)

*Cultural conflict:* In 14:1–15:13 Paul also addresses a particular problem: it was the stark difference between Jewish and Gentile believers in the church community in Rome. They had come from vastly different cultural backgrounds. Their Christian community likely began with mostly diaspora Jews and some Gentile converts to Judaism, but by now it was predominantly Gentile, suggested by how often Paul mentions Gentiles in this letter (1:13; 2:14,24; 3:29; 9:24,30; 11:11–13,25; 15:9–12,16,18,27; 16:4). Returning to Rome after Claudius was gone and Nero was in power (AD 54), the Jewish Christians were likely trying to re-exert their influence over the Gentile Christians. This produced conflict, specifically about whether Gentile Christians had to eat Kosher foods or keep Jewish sacred days (Rom 14:2,5). Paul writes to help Gentile Christians value God’s sovereign work in history among the Jews (Rom 3:1,2; chapters 9­–11), and, to understand how God wanted the Jews to hear the gospel “first” (Rom 1:16b; cf. 2:9,10). He also stresses in Romans how Jews and Gentiles (or Greeks[[4]](#footnote-4)) are all under sin and receive the same righteousness from God by faith in Jesus (Rom 1:16; 2:9,10; 3:9,29,30; 4:11,12, 16; 10:12; 11:11,12). He teaches both groups to not judge, but instead, to welcome and bear with each other in order to build peace, “mutual upbuilding,” harmony, and ultimately, to glorify God (Rom 14:1,3,19; 15:1,5–7).

*Gospel exegesis:* The main content of Romans is its theological section in chapters 1–8. It is considered the most comprehensive explanation of the gospel in the Bible. A new study of these chapters sparked the Protestant Reformation through Luther and Calvin and has strongly influenced Protestant churches to this day. But we wonder why Paul spent eight chapters expounding the gospel.

A much shorter version of it can be seen in Paul’s letter to the Galatians, written about nine years earlier. In that letter Paul insisted that people do not have to become Jews or follow Jewish rules and rituals in order to become Christians; they need only to live by faith in Christ (Gal 2:15,16). Paul was, in part, responding to a group called the Judaizers who were saying that the new Gentile believers be circumcised in order to be saved.[[5]](#footnote-5)

*Circumcision controversy in Acts:* These Judaizers are mentioned repeatedly in the Book of Acts. On his first missionary journey, wherever Paul went these people would show up and stir up trouble (Acts 13:45,50; 14:2,5,19). They eventually went to Paul’s home church in Antioch demanding Gentile Christians be circumcised (Acts 15:1). When Paul and Barnabas went to the Jerusalem church to get direction about this issue, these people stood up and demanded the same thing (Acts 15:5). Through the help of Peter and James the Jerusalem church wrote a letter to all Gentile Christians to encourage them not to worry about circumcision (Acts 15:7–30). But on his second missionary journey the Judaizers kept showing up and causing problems (Acts 17:5,13; 18:6,12,13). On his third missionary journey, when he arrived in Ephesus Paul realized that some teachers had even been telling Gentiles only about the baptism of John the Baptist and hadn’t said anything about receiving the Holy Spirit by believing in Jesus (Acts 19:1–7; cf. 2:38; 10:45; 11:17). During his ongoing ministry in Ephesus Paul said the Judaizers’ plots against him were like “trials” (Ac20:19).

*Circumcision controversy in Paul’s other epistles:* The circumcision issue also appears in Paul’s letters. He first refutes it in Galatians (Gal 2:3–5,11–14; 5:1–12). Later he explains to the Corinthians how circumcision is not an issue for Christians (1Cor 7:19). His opponents, some of whom had come from the Jerusalem church to Corinth, strongly opposed Paul and his apostleship. Paul was concerned the Corinthian believers would be led astray from Christ by a different gospel, likely preached by these Judaizers (2Cor 11:3,4). They were suggesting that Paul was teaching a grace that was too permissive, maybe even immoral and anti-Jewish (Rom 3:8; 6:1,15; 9:1–5).[[6]](#footnote-6) Later, from a Roman prison Paul was still refuting circumcision to the Ephesian, Philippian and Colossian churches, and to Titus, the Gentile pastor sent to the island of Crete (Eph 2:11; Phil 3:3; Col 2:11; Ti 1:10).

*Conclusion:* With all this in mind, it is no wonder Paul felt the need to sit down and write to the Romans this thorough exposition of the gospel, which he believed would be like preventative medicine for this confusing legalistic heresy.[[7]](#footnote-7) In chapters 1–8 he expounds what the gospel of God’s grace is, and what it is not, in terms of sin and the law and true Christian freedom in the Spirit. He proclaims the gospel’s origin and core truth with the expression “the righteousness of God” (1:17; 3:5, 21, 22,25,26; cf. 10:3)[[8]](#footnote-8). Paul was convinced that if the Romans learned to think and live based on this truth, they would be spiritually strong, able to resist other influences, and ultimately be equipped to explain the gospel clearly to all those coming to Rome who might be interested in learning more about Christ.

*Major theme*

**“The righteous[[9]](#footnote-9) shall live by faith[[10]](#footnote-10)”** (1:17; see also 3:22; 4:5,9,11,13, 22; 9:30; 10:6; cf. Hb 2:4; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38). Romans shows us how we can experience this powerful truth: it is only when our hearts have been circumcised by the Spirit to become conscious of our own sin (2:28,29; 3:20b), and, when we realize that trying to earn righteousness by “the works of the law” is completely futile (3:20a, 27,28; 4:2,4,6; 9:11,32; 11:6). The object of our faith is not ourselves, our will or exertion (9:16), but the gospel, the good news that God made Jesus “a propitiation by his blood,” and that he “was raised for our justification” (3:25a; 4:25). This is the main development of chapters 1–4.

In chapters 5–15 Paul goes on to explain what living by faith means:

* Living by faith begins when we first believe the gospel of Jesus; but it continues in our lives as we enjoy peace with God, stand in his grace, boast in our hope of his glory, and glory in our sufferings, which produce godly character and help us experience God’s love (5:1–5).
* Living by faith also means considering ourselves dead to sin and learning to serve in the new way of the Spirit (6:11; 7:6).
* Living by faith means upholding God’s law, respecting it as holy, righteous and good, and that we need it “in order that sin might be shown to be sin,” to be convinced that it is “sinful beyond measure” (7:7,12,13).
* Living by faith means letting the Spirit govern our minds so that we can truly submit to God’s law, experience life and peace, and, with the Spirit’s help, put to death the misdeeds of our body (8:6,7,11,13).
* Living by faith means holding on to the glorious hope of the new creation, “the freedom of the glory of the children of God,” our adoption as sons and the redeemed bodies God has promised us (8:18–23).
* Living by faith means letting the Spirit help us pray (8:26,27).
* Living by faith means trusting in God’s sovereign work of grace in our lives to bring us all the way to the glory of being conformed to the image of his Son (8:28–30).
* Living by faith means holding onto God’s love for us in Christ that makes us more than conquerors (8:31–39).
* Living by faith enables us to see God’s purpose in his redemptive history working in both the Jews and the Gentiles (chapters 9–11).
* Living by faith is not only a personal matter but also helps us build a loving community even with those very different from ourselves (chapters 12–15).
* To sum it up, Paul characterizes living by faith as “the obedience of faith” (1:5; 16:26). It means confessing Christ as Lord, presenting ourselves to him as living sacrifices, letting our minds be renewed from being conformed to this world so that we can begin to discern God’s will, and, learning to obey his law of love in all our encounters with others, in both the church and society (10:9; 12:1,2; 13:8–10; for our need for the Spirit’s help in our transformation and renewed mind, see 8:4–7).

OUTLINE OF ROMANS

Prologue (1:1–15)

Main thesis (1:16–17): “The righteous shall live by faith”

1. Everyone has sinned; everyone needs faith in Jesus (1:18–4:25)
2. Everyone has sinned (1:18–3:20)
3. God’s wrath against the godless world (1:18–32)
4. God’s wrath against the self-righteous Jews (2:1–3:8)
5. The whole world under sin is accountable to God (3:9–20)
6. Everyone needs faith in Jesus (3:21–4:25)
7. God’s righteousness for all through faith in Christ (3:21–31)
8. David and Abraham: examples of righteousness by faith (4:1–25)
9. The fruits of faith (5:1–8:39)
10. The inner fruits of living by faith in Christ (5:1–11)
11. Faith in Christ’s new history of grace and life (5:12–21)
12. Living by faith leads to sanctification (6:1–23)
13. The law’s role in living by faith (7:1–25)
14. The Spirit’s role in living by faith (8:1–17)
15. Living by faith in the glorious hope (8:18–39)
16. Faith to see God’s sovereign work in both Jews and Gentiles (9–11)
17. Faith in God’s sovereign mercy (9:1–33)
18. Faith to call on the name of the Lord (10:1–21)
19. Faith in the remnant and in God’s work of ingrafting (11:1–36)
20. Living by faith in community (12:1–15:13)
21. Living by faith personally and in Christian community (12:1–21)
22. Living by faith in society (13:1–14)
23. Living by faith in a diverse Christian community (14:1–15:13)
24. Faith in the priestly service of the gospel of God (15:14–33)

Epilogue (16:1–27)

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1. Luke, the author of Luke’s Gospel, who was also Paul’s physician and traveling companion, wrote Acts circa AD 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Suetonius (AD 69 – 122), *Divus Claudius* 25; Cassius Dio (AD 150 – 235), *History 60.6.6-7;*  Paulus Orosius (fifth century), *History 7.6.15-16*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. We know from Acts 28:11–31 that Paul eventually did arrive in Rome, under house arrest, circa AD 62, and was engaged in gospel ministry there for at least two years before he was imprisoned. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In 1:16, 2:9,10, instead of using the Greek word for Gentiles (“Ethne”), Paul uses the singular word “Helleni” to parallel the singular expression “the Jew” (“Ioudaio”); but the meaning of “Helleni” is essentially the same as “Ethne”, i.e. anyone who is not Jewish. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. During his ministry Apostle Peter also faced pressure from this group (Acts 11:2,3; cf. Gal 2:11–14). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. When he finally brought the Gentile offering to the Jerusalem church, Paul was warned about “the many thousands” of Jewish believers there who thought he was teaching Jews scattered throughout the Roman Empire not to circumcise their children and to turn away from the law of Moses (Ac21:20,21). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Paul refutes the Christian’s need for circumcision in Romans as well, in 2:25–29 and 4:11. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The only other place Paul uses the phrase “the righteousness of God” is in 2 Corinthians 5:21. It can refer to: 1) one of God’s attributes; 2) a status given to us by God; or 3) an intervening activity of God in the world, especially his saving work in Christ (3:22–26) and his righteous wrath toward human sin (1:18; 2:5,8; 12:19; 13:4,5) . [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In Greek the root word “dik-“ appears in Romans 67 times, in various ways: e.g. the verb “dikaioo” (justify or declare righteous), the nouns “dikaiosyne” (righteousness) and “adikia” (unrighteousness), and the adjectives “dikaios” (righteous) and “dikaion” or “endikon” (just or unjust). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The Greek words for “faith” and “believe” are repeated in Romans 48 times. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)