

## Unit 1 Introduction

# Paul's Letter to the Romans

We cannot downplay the importance of Paul's letter to the Romans within the Christian church. Many significant persons throughout the history of Christianity have noted the influence of this letter in shaping their faith and understanding of God's grace. For instance, Romans was decisive in the conversion, life, and thought of Augustine of Hippo, including his battles with Pelagius over original sin. Martin Luther, in the preface to his commentary on Romans, suggests from his personal experience that the more someone reads and studies the letter, the more one appreciates and values it. And our theological foreparent, John Wesley, wrote about the experience that transformed his life and ministry on May 24, 1738 when he went reluctantly to a meeting "in Aldersgate-Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: And an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."<sup>1</sup> Today, this letter continues to inspire fresh conversations about the meaning and nature of the gospel, God's grace, and the essence of faith and salvation, both for Paul and for us as contemporary church readers of Scripture.

### 1. The Place of Romans within the New Testament

The first seven verses of Romans make it clear that a specific group of people—"all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people" (Romans 1:7)—are those to whom these materials are addressed, even though we seldom read it apart from the rest of the New Testament. The opening indicates that we are essentially reading someone else's mail, as this is a letter written to be read or heard on its own without any other book with it when the Roman believers first received it.

Yet we do not possess this writing as a separate, standalone text, as it is part of a larger New Testament collection that includes 26 other books. The placement of Romans after the book of Acts is not accidental but intentional should be noted in two ways. First, Paul's letters were arranged from the longest to the shortest, with the result that Romans appears first. Second, the placement of Romans as the first letter in the collection of the Pauline letters within the New Testament locates Romans immediately after Acts. Most significant is that the last chapter of Acts depicts Paul's arrival in Rome, where he later was "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ both unhindered and with complete confidence"<sup>2</sup>

(Acts 28:31). Thus, the subsequent location of the letter to the Romans after this open-ended description at the conclusion of the Acts narrative offers what appears to be a canonical explanation for what Paul preached and taught during his ministry in Rome (although the letter was written before that time).

### 2. The Genre of Romans

As has already been indicated here, Romans is a letter. Interpreters point both to the beginning and ending of Romans (1:1-15; 15:14—16:27) as having characteristics of ancient letters. The opening includes the identification of the sender (1:1) and recipients (1:7a) of the letter, followed by the customary greeting (1:7b) and thanksgiving section (1:8-15). The ending deals with more personal and situational issues that are consistent with the occasional nature of ancient letters. For instance, the latter part of chapter 15 (vv. 23-33) reveals some of his future plans and how these may affect his plans to visit the Roman believers. However, what is unusual is that the core portion of Romans (1:16—15:13) does not read like a letter at all, as few parts refer directly to the Roman readers directly. However, since Paul had not yet visited Rome (see 15:23), one can understand why this letter lacks the personal touches found in other letters like Philippians and 1 Thessalonians.

The central core or body of Romans reflects the kind of discourse consistent with ancient rhetoric that was concerned with speeches and the art of persuasion. Most interpreters believe that the body of Romans reflects what is classified as "epideictic" or "demonstrative" rhetoric, which sought to enhance knowledge, understanding, or belief for a given purpose. However, because Paul reveals in Romans even less information about the situation than in other Pauline letters (which is not surprising since he had little or no first-hand information to go on), interpreters have little explicit material on which to draw conclusions about his purpose. Because of the relative scarcity of direct information, varied conclusions are associated with the situation and historical context related to the letter's writing.

### 3. The Situation and Purpose of Romans

Perhaps the most helpful passage that pinpoints this letter's historical setting is Romans 16:3-4, which includes Paul's greeting to Prisca and Aquila, who are also mentioned in Acts 18:1-3 (where she is called Priscilla). In Acts, the narrator includes the couple among Jewish refugees whom the emperor Claudius expelled from Rome (AD 49), probably over "disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus" (see Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, "Claudius," 25), which may be

a confused reference to Jesus. This led to Paul becoming acquainted with the pair in Corinth; the two also traveled with Paul to Ephesus (Acts 18:18, 24-26). When Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from that city, Priscilla and Aquila were still there (see 1 Corinthian 16:19). The couple's return to Rome probably occurred after Nero succeeded Claudius as emperor (AD 54).

The above evidence suggests that conflicts within the Jewish community over Christian teachings led to the expulsion of at least some Jews, including Jewish believers from Rome because of Claudius' edict. In their absence, the Christian movement became prominently Gentile and likely attracted those Gentiles who had been "Godfearers" (those Gentiles who had been attracted to Judaism, the Jewish synagogues, and the worship of the God of Israel but had not converted to Judaism; see, e.g., Cornelius in Acts 10:1-48). When Jewish believers returned to Rome, they found themselves disregarded and at odds with Gentile believers over observance of Jewish law, especially dietary issues, since Christians typically shared meals together when observing the Lord's Supper. Such matters were likely behind concerns regarding the "weak in faith" believers in Romans 14 and 15 (the Jewish believers), who were vulnerable to "the strong" believers (i.e., the Gentile believers) who contended that one may eat whatever one wishes.

A few conclusions about the purposes for writing Romans emerge from the letter itself. First, the apostle clearly wished to introduce himself to all the Christian communities or house churches in Rome. His ministry was at a pivotal point: the delivery of the offering in Jerusalem would conclude his work in the eastern part of the empire and would free him to undertake a new mission to the western part of the empire, Spain (Rom 15:19-24). By introducing himself to the Roman believers, he hoped to gain their support for his missionary vision (15:23-29).

Second, Paul sought to introduce the gospel as he taught and

understood it. Although some have contended that he saw the need to provide an apostolic foundation to his work, the letter drops hints that there were rumors about himself and his teachings. We find such hints in Paul's use of diatribe (i.e., his interjection of rhetorical questions and arguments from "imaginary" opponents into his argument; see, e.g., Romans 3:7-8; 6:1-2; 9:1-2). It is not clear that he was confronting Jewish-Christian opponents who disputed his teachings (such as in Galatia) or that he was challenging false teachers, but such comments suggest his resistance to opposing views.

Third, Paul understood the quarrels in Rome to be symptomatic of a deeper problem—a troublesome attitude of Gentile Christians toward Jews, both believers and non-believers—that needed to be addressed. Since Paul's understanding of the gospel began with God's self-revelation to the Jewish people, he also perceived the Gentile-Christian response to Jews in Rome to be a misunderstanding of God's cosmic purposes because it propagated a Gentile religion in the name of Jesus as an alternative to Judaism that excluded Jewish individuals from participation. In Paul's mind, that was too narrow of an understanding of the Christian mission. Thus, the "strong" and "weak" in Rome needed to mutually accept and support one another (Romans 14:1—15:13). Paul understood all believers—Jewish and Gentile alike—to be united together by the grace of God.

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<sup>1</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed., 14 vols. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872), 1:103.

<sup>2</sup> Author's Translation

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