

Romans – Part I

Introduction

Paul was born in the cosmopolitan city of Tarsus. He had studied under the famous Rabbi Gamaliel in Jerusalem. He was a Roman citizen but first and foremost he was a Jew. He studied the Law of Moses and devoted himself to fulfilling every letter of tradition and immersed himself in the rituals of the Pharisees because he genuinely wanted to please God and be a worthy person (righteous) for God to use. He was zealous (passionate) for God.

But in his zealous pursuit of righteousness he tried to persecute the Christians. Whilst on his personal mission to persecute Jewish turncoats to Christianity he encountered Jesus; he had a Damascus road experience, where Jesus confronted him, rebuked him, changed him, and then Jesus set him on a whole new direction. The righteousness he coveted could not be found in the traditions of the Pharisees, but in the faith of the very people he sought to kill. These same people showed him supernatural grace and showed him the source of their goodness. They were passing on the righteousness they had received by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul's encounter with the risen Jesus completely and utterly transformed him. His future no longer lay in Jerusalem and works of the law, but now, amongst the Gentiles, **preaching grace and living by faith**. Instead of stamping out Christianity, he became the tireless Apostle, travelling more than 20,000 miles between Jerusalem and Rome and proclaiming the gospel to people who had never heard it before.

This letter to the Roman Church is Paul's most significant writings that God commissioned him to write. It was written after his third missionary journey in AD 56/57, which was 20 years after Paul started preaching. During the last ten years of that 20 year ministry he had planted many churches throughout the Mediterranean world; it was written whilst he was staying in Corinth. Little did Paul realise the impact it will have through the centuries to come. It was this letter to the Romans that sparked of a revolution in Martin Luther who reintroduced the truth of **Justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone**. It changed the mindset and ministry of Jonathan Edwards and strangely warmed the heart of John Wesley.

In Roman times letters were very expensive and difficult to send. There have been around 14,000 letters discovered by archeologists from this period. A typical letter would normally have 20 to 200 words. Long letters were rare. Cicero's longest letter was 2500 words. Paul's average letter was 1300 words, but this letter to the Romans was **over 7000 words and is his longest letter**. In fact is the longest letter found from the entire ancient world!

This letter is also unusual for a number of reasons:

The closing greetings are exceptionally long. The last chapter is a long list of people. In those days it was unusual to spend so much time sending greeting between friends.

It is also different to Paul's' other letters because he is writing to a church which he did not plant and which he had had no previous contact. Paul made a point of faithfully looking after every church that he personally started and would not interfere with anyone else's work. So it seemed strange that he would write his longest letter to a church that he had never even started let alone visited. But it is clear that he wanted them to know him and that he wanted to meet them.

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Paul had long admired the congregation in the capital city of the Roman Empire. Although he had neither founded the church in Rome or even visited it, he did have connections with several members (Romans 16:1-15). Some had been partners in ministry, some cell mates in the early years of ministry, several were converts he had made. **Their obedience to the Word of God and to faithfulness to one another had become legendary among the churches (16:19).** They faced many pressures in Rome.

During the reign of Emperor Claudius (AD 41-54), the Roman government – who were normally tolerant began to prohibit persuading people to change faiths (proselytizing). Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome because Jewish Christians had been evangelising their neighbours.

We can't be sure who planted this Church, but at first it consisted of all Jewish people when there were about 40,000 Jews living in Rome. When the Roman emperor Claudius had expelled all the Jews from Rome, the church then consisted only of Gentiles.

In AD 54 Claudius was poisoned and his adopted heir, Nero took over. Nero allowed Jews and Christians to return, because it was good for business. After reclaiming their homes the Jewish community pressurised the Christians not to evangelise and to keep a low profile. For the first three years of Nero's reign there were no problems as the teenage emperor was too concerned with threats from within the Palace to worry about what was happening in Rome. It was during this three year period that the Apostle Paul wrote to his fellow brothers and sisters at Rome from Corinth. Nero removed his threat by poisoning his mother and then turned his attentions to please the Roman citizens.

When Paul wrote this letter there were over one million inhabitants in Rome with over half of them slaves. Life was hard to live in Rome with the rich poor divide. Most people lived in squalor. People congregated and lived by race. Life was hard for everyone, but being a Christian in Rome made it worse. For both Jew and Gentile Christians, the price of discipleship often meant the loss of family and the safety that provided.

If we focus in on the city of Rome we find that there were many sinful practices typical in that city, major antisocial behavior, complete lack of law and order and uncontrollable violence and crime. A dangerous place to live!

This ancient capital city of the Roman Empire has a number of parallels and comparisons with our day. Throughout this letter Paul was concerned that the church did not become influenced and corrupted by the society they lived in. Today, we should have the same concern as Paul, that the church does not become influence or corrupted by the society we live in.

Sunday is a day of celebration for Christians. It was never a day of rest in the early Church. For 300 years Christians could not worship at 10:30am and then 6:00pm. They had to meet very early or very late because Jewish believers could only have a day off on a Saturday. The Gentile believers had a day off under Roman law every tenth day and slaves had no day off at all. Since many of the Christians were slaves, they could not observe Sundays for 300 years. This caused tension between the Jews and Gentiles. **Sunday for us is God's day to meet with Him with fellow believers.** But it has come a day where people do what they want. It is no longer **holy** unto the Lord. It is good to remind us that this is His day and to honour it.

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In AD 64 Nero went mad. His persecution of Christians became so shockingly brutal that the citizens of Rome began to pity the Christians. The believers in Rome desperately needed encouragement, this letter did so in three ways.

First the letter confirmed their understanding of the gospel. Paul carefully explained the truth of the gospel. The Holy Spirit inspired the content and superintended the process of writing so that the believers in Rome received a complete, comprehensive and concise proclamation of Christian truth.

This letter is more of a theological lecture than a letter and it is more intellectual in content than the others. It is considered the greatest exposition of the Christian teaching within the New Testament. It is full of profound truths. It covers theology on redemption, guilt of mankind, and the free gift of salvation to be received by faith alone.

It is about the story of God's plan of redemption in Christ (chapter 1:18-3:20) the detail of Christ's work and its implications for Christians (3:21-11:26) and the application of the gospel to everyday life (12:1- 16:27). The Apostle Paul clearly taught that we can only trust in Jesus for our salvation. We are going to explore this in great detail throughout our studies. It is the first systematic theology of the Christian faith. This is in effect the Christian Magna Carta. It declares essential beliefs. As we study this wonderful, God breathed, masterpiece the Holy Spirit will provide us with whatever we may lack. If we submit to the truths we will discover, if we haven't already, that the just shall live by faith.

Second the letter affirmed the authenticity of their faith and commended them for their obedience. People need confirmation that they are on the right course and should continue as they have been, otherwise they will grow discouraged and wander off course. Maybe some here need to be encouraged in their faith.

The Church in Rome had for a long time been an exemplary model of steadfast faith and faithful community. **I hope that OCC will have an exemplary model of steadfast faith and faithful community.**

Paul encouraged them to continue to do what they were doing. Like every other Church, congregations were susceptible to the influences of false teachers. The letter equipped them to recognise the truth.

Third the letter gave them vision for the future and urged them to become Paul's partners in accomplishing it. When churches take their eyes off the vision, the inevitable results in what is called **survival mentality**. Rather than accomplishing the plans of God to redeem and transform his creation, churches in survival mentality forget their reason for existing which leads to irrelevance. Their surrounding communities hear little of Jesus and what they do hear is unattractive. May OCC never do that.

Faith is mentioned 40 times in Romans. It was faith that united Jews and Gentiles. It is faith that unites us together at Oasis CC from all different nations. We are all sons, daughters, brothers and sisters through faith in Him.

1:1 *Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God.* The opening words of Paul are very important and significant to the readers of this letter. When Paul used the word bondservant he used the word *doulos* which means a slave

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that is the entire property of his master. Paul used this word because he felt he was no longer his own, and that his life belonged completely to his heavenly owner. He therefore he had no rights of his own and now lived to do the master's will. He had become a willing slave of Jesus Christ.

Church, right at the start of this study on Romans I want us to keep this in mind. The only position any Christian at Oasis CC should desire is the position of a bondservant, a willing slave of Jesus Christ, with no rights of our own, a life belonging completely to our heavenly owner. Completely the Lord's; and wholly devoted to sacrificial obedience to Him. **To love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our mind, with all our strength.** This is completely opposite to this world's view that is all about me and what I want.

Paul used the term separated which means set apart. It expresses his personal destiny, he was gripped by the fact that he was chosen by God. The normal Greek work for set apart is *aphorismenos* which is the same word for Pharisee in the Hebrew. But what was saying here that he was now a different kind of Pharisee from what he had been. Previously he had been a separated **from** the gentiles now he was separated **for** them. Friends today we have not been set apart from the people of this world, yes the things of this world, but we are separated for the people.