

Romans: Context

Let us pray.

*We have this deep confidence that you are Lord of history and you are Lord of lives, and so we pray to You, appealing to You that You would soften our hearts help us recognize that we are all sinners before the living God. We praise You for the ability to study Your Word. We pray that You would make the letter to the Romans warm and near to our hearts, and that You would challenge us in light of the Gospel truth, that we would not be endeared by it as much as awakened and overwhelmed with Your love and what it cost You to bring us back into a reconciled relationship with You. We ask that You would not only bless us, but that You would also use us as living letters of Your Word to those around us where we live and work. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

We have a few short hours in which to look at the book of Romans. Perhaps the first thing we should do is reflect on the historical setting of Romans. Remember that 2 Corinthians was written from Macedonia in anticipation of Paul's third visit to Corinth. As he moves to Corinth to deal with that difficult situation of disharmony, factions, disunity, and self-seeking, Paul then, in that cradle of conflict, writes to the Romans between 56 and 57 A.D. Paul's first visit to Corinth preceded his first letter to them. The second was the sorrowful visit he mentions in 2 Corinthians, which we can deduce to have been a brief trip from Ephesus to Corinth rather than the long Macedonian journey which Paul had originally intended. Paul's third visit to the Corinthians, during which time he wrote to the Romans, concluded his journey of soliciting funds from the Macedonians and Greeks. After taking the contributions of these congregations to Jerusalem, Paul had a great desire to go to Rome.

If we look at the conclusion of Romans it is likely that Phoebe, the person mentioned in the introduction to the greetings of Romans, is the one who brought the letter to the Romans. The evidence is not conclusive but the NIV translates Romans 16:1 as, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant..." [The word is *diakonon*, and if you do a word analysis, this does not necessarily mean "deaconess." It can be a person who serves in a particular function. You have to be careful not to narrow the word meaning, but this *diakonon* is a significant person who has a particular commission in the church of Cenchræe, a harbor place near Corinth.] "I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me." This is most likely the person who brought the letter, which Paul had composed in the Spirit of God, to Rome.

The immediate situation from which Paul writes is that he wishes to visit Rome. As we slowly inch our way toward answering the question of why Paul writes Romans—which has been a question besetting many an exegete and theologian—we can at least say that he desired to visit Rome. He says this in Romans 1:10 and repeats it in 15:22. However, we get the impression from the historical setting that Paul desires to go to Spain; he intends to use Rome as a stopover and a time of mutual strengthening and encouragement, and perhaps he desires also to receive some help to move on to Spain. Connected with that motivation is the collection that Paul seeks for the Jerusalem church. In Romans and elsewhere, Paul states that since the Gentiles receive such great benefit from the Jews, the Jews should receive some physical benefit from the Gentiles in their time of need. This is a means of expressing the unity of faith. Paul is strongly aware that there is already division between the Jewish and Gentile Christians in cities, particularly in Palestine. It is a growing concern. Thus the collection for Jerusalem is somehow intertwined with his desire to go to Rome. The collection is a link between 1 and 2 Corinthians and Romans, so Paul seeks to bring the people of God together. That is a major undertaking, because the Jewish Christians risk falling back into Judaism as we see in Hebrews and Galatians, and the Gentiles

risk falling back into their various pagan religions, as we see in Corinthians and Colossians. There are many strings attached to people's lives, and these two groups are always being wooed back to their cradles—to where they came from. You have probably seen people who, converted when they are older, revert back to old patterns. They are not able to break out of the wrong patterns they learned in their youth; they are not able to break loose from that which they have been called out of in order to constitute the people of God and be at His disposal. In spite of this danger, the Jews and Gentiles are called together to be the people of God. That is a supreme challenge. It is a challenge to this day, both in our lives and in our relationships. Thus we have a huge challenge at hand and we see Paul wrestling with it.

Look at the concern Paul has in Acts 19:21, to get an idea of the setting—an understanding of where Paul is and what he is pursuing. “After all this had happened, Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. ‘After I have been there,’ he said, ‘I must visit Rome also.’” Thus there is this concern to go to Rome, and Acts 23:11 continues that theme in a more theological sense: “The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, ‘Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.’” This is an anticipation of a witness form that will not necessarily be free, but Paul will have the freedom and opportunity to witness. This is the calling to go to Rome. Now turn to Romans 15:23. As he is continuing his third missionary journey, Paul writes:

But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to see you [that is, those in Rome], I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while. Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor...

This is probably the best way to bring together those themes of visiting Rome (Acts 19:21, 23:11) and the service to Jerusalem, the need to go to Jerusalem first. Paul wants to bring this fruit from the Gentile church as a sign of solidarity to the Jewish Christians in Palestine. Sometimes a gift is a significant bridge builder if the right motives are there.

Let us go back and ask, “Why did Paul write Romans?” There are many divergent views on this, and you will be bombarded with various explanations as you read commentaries. We can distinguish between two different camps: historical and dogmatic. The historical camp says there are clear historical indications as to why Paul writes to the Romans. According to this school of thought, these are perhaps the exclusive reasons why Paul writes to the Romans. I would say that is a little extreme, but I do side with this camp on some points. For example, just look at the pattern of Paul's letter writing. He has just written 2 Corinthians in anticipation of arriving there and helping them with their problems. Why would that not apply to Rome? The big argument against it is that Paul knew the Corinthians but he did not know the Romans. That argument is not very strong because Paul did not know the Colossian church in Colossae either, but he had informants—people who told him of concerns—who ministered in particular churches. And who would Paul have talked to concerning Rome? How could Paul have heard from Rome? Of course, through Priscilla and Aquila—a very important leadership group who had just recently come from Rome. In the greetings to the Romans, Paul greets Priscilla and Aquila, so they must have returned to Rome. In 52 A.D., they were with Paul, and at this time, 57 A.D., they were back in Rome.

Priscilla and Aquila were a very mature couple. They instructed Apollos when they heard about his zeal for explaining the Old Testament Scriptures and how they speak of, lead toward, and call for the truth of Christ. So Priscilla and Aquila would have informed Paul about the situation in Rome. Thus, the fact

that Paul did not know the Romans personally, and therefore would not have known their struggles and issues, is not a strong argument. I think that the historical reference to answering objections and dealing with problems certainly fits the pattern of pastoral care of the apostle to the Gentiles who was called to serve.

In Rome, there is a controversy similar to the one we have already detected in the Galatian churches. There is something of the Judaizing phenomenon there in Rome. This aspect, this historical reference, goes beyond what I have already explained concerning Paul's desire to see the Roman church, to meet with them, to move beyond them, to share with them. There is the deeper concern of meeting their needs. There is some apostolic ministry to the Romans based on the historical setting and situation.

Those who pursue a dogmatic explanation for the writing of Romans say that, in terms of Paul's career, he now would have served many years. By 57 A.D., he is becoming more experienced and here in Corinth, he says, "For heaven's sake, we have to define and clarify the true and full nature of the Christian faith." So he sits down and writes this brilliantly-argued, step-by-step presentation of the rudimentary elements of the Christian faith. It does not matter who he writes it to—the Romans or somebody in Spain. His audience is not important. What is important is what he is setting out. This would be a caricature of the dogmatic explanation of why Paul writes. These people would say that Romans really has no historical connection or concern, but God compelled Paul to give to the Christian church, wherever they were, the full counsel of God regarding the Gospel, beginning from Adam and Eve and describing what the Gospel is all about and what it leads to. This view contains some errors, as you will see when we look at the letter to the Romans. However, there is some merit to this dogmatic presentation of what Paul is really about. Romans contains a fascinating and intriguing clarity of development. It may be a challenge to find the red thread of James, but you will not have that in Romans. We may quibble about all the details on how we arrange and outline the Book of Romans, but the basic structure is rather clear and defined.

Both the historical view and the dogmatic view contain some merit. There is a historical occasion and a historical concern. The historical reasons that we gather from Acts figure into Paul's concern for the Roman church. But there is the sense of a mature, complex—not necessarily systematic, but very well-developed—presentation of the basic concerns of the Christian faith, tailored to the Roman situation. I do see some dogmatic elements in Romans, but the historical factors are more predominate in my understanding.

As we will see when we get closer to Rome, there is a problem among Jews over the Christian faith. There is most likely a problem between Jews and Gentiles, as well, in Rome. There are some tensions and differences that we can already assess in other letters. Some of the problems we find in Galatians are reappearing here. Most likely there is tension between the strong and the weak—those who are part of the Roman establishment and those who are not. Again, the unity of the faith is threatened. If there is anything in Romans that you gather, it is that we are all in the same situation, and it is only because of God's mercy that we have a chance to be saved and live a godly life. We are all brought down and brought up. Regardless of where you come from, you are brought down, and regardless of where you come from, you are brought up. The bringing down is really difficult and uncomfortable, as you will see.

Paul faces and addresses some challenges. As you will see, one of the big challenges interpreters have had is explaining Romans 9 to 11 in the whole scheme of Paul's argument. Why does Paul spend three chapters on the topic of Israel within God's salvation-historical plan? There is a possible explanation: namely, that Paul is increasingly concerned about the fact that wherever he goes, there is a problem with Jewish reception of the Gospel. On the other hand, there is a real "success" with Gentile reception of the

Gospel. It is not so much a question of why Paul is so unsuccessful with Jewish people as it is a theological question of what God is doing with His covenant people—why the Spirit of God and the Gospel are so readily received by those who are not His people, and so unready received by those who are His people. Paul is very concerned, and perhaps he anticipates that concern among that minority of Jews who have become Christians in Rome and have seen great suffering. I think it figures into this total plan of God's to deal with that issue carefully in Romans 9 to 11.

This is a very brief sketch of the reasons Paul wrote Romans. To summarize, we will say that Paul wrote Romans primarily because of historical concerns and secondarily because of concerns of bringing the total maturity of the Gospel and the faith to the Roman Christians.

We are going to look at the political and general situation in Rome during this time, the late 50s of the first century A.D., and how Paul addresses the Roman Christians within that situation. We will study the movements of Aquila and Priscilla and the concerns of the Roman church. As we understand the circumstances of Romans in this historical setting, the message will become transparent and that transparency will speak to us. The effort we put into understanding the message of Romans in that historical setting will pay off in the sense that we will understand the reality of their situation and be able to apply it to our own situations. So it is actually not a shortcut to open Scripture and say, "What does it say to me?" That is actually a deviation. The most direct way to get the message of Scripture is by going through the trouble of understanding the historical setting. We must understand what Paul is giving to the Romans and ask, "What does that say to us?" It is more work, but Scripture challenges us to engage exactly in that kind of work.

We know much more about Rome than we do about Palestine in the first century A.D. When Paul wrote to the Romans, Nero was on the throne. Nero is known as a vicious emperor who began his reign in 54 A.D. and his reign went until about the year 68. It is important to note that the first phase of Nero's reign, until about 59 A.D., was a less vicious phase in his rule—not that he was ever good or benevolent, but his ruthlessness and selfishness did not come into fruition until 64 A.D., when we have the first major Christian persecution. In Rome, there was a major fire in the Circus Maximus. Tacitus, who was a careful historian, says that Nero may have started this fire. Suetonius was quite sure that Nero did start it. The rumor in the city was that Nero started the fire because he thought the best way to rebuild Rome was to burn it down and rebuild it. By doing so, the story goes, he hoped to make a monument for himself, an enduring memorial. Then people would say, "Poor Nero, most of Rome burned down but look what he did to rebuild." That rumor persisted, and Nero needed some scapegoats. It was not by chance that he chose the Christians in 64 A.D. as his scapegoats—to be burned on stakes and eaten by dogs. This was the first persecution of Christians, although it was localized in Rome in 64. Nero was a destructive force, and tradition tells us that Peter and Paul were martyred under this persecution.

But we are going too far forward in history. The initial phase, if we say that Romans was written around 57, finds Nero a little less vicious and involved. There is significance, in Paul's writing, to Roman citizenship. Not so much that he would draw his safety from that or that he would use it as something to fall back on. Rather, he sees it as an analogy: "Just as you enjoy rights, protection, privilege, and belonging somewhere as a citizen, so you understand yourself as a citizen of God's kingdom." The significance of the Roman Empire is more along the lines of using it as an image rather than as a final port for your soul.

In Romans 13, Paul deals with the issue of how we should relate to governmental authority. People note that this chapter was written during the initial phase of Nero's reign in 57 A.D.; some wonder how Paul would have written if it had been later under Nero's suppressive phase. That is a huge theme: the

individual and corporate responsibility and submission to the authority of the state. I do not believe in the absolute authority of government, so you cannot read Romans 13 in an absolute sense. You need to respect human and worldly government as an institution of God, but still there are limits and points where questions must be asked.

Let us look at some other aspects of the situation in Rome. Rome was an empire that arose in 64 B.C., and has now become the major power in the entire Mediterranean sphere. What you need to understand about the Roman power is that they had the technology, the money, the resources, and the military might, but they did not have the culture. Roman culture, even Roman religion, was imported from the Greeks. Rome was very much a shell. The law structures of the Roman Empire were well-developed, but the philosophical, internal, cultural, and literary heart was borrowed from Greece. Seneca was an important Stoic philosopher in Rome, and it is not by chance that he was inclined toward a Stoic philosophical trend. You may remember from Acts 17 what influence the Stoic philosophy had upon the aristocracy in Rome, but also upon the general populace. We need to think of a fairly strong Stoic influence in Rome as we read the letter addressed to the Roman Christians.

If you look at the root of Stoic philosophy, it is a self-governing, self-disciplined approach to life. You need to apply what you know about Stoicism to Rome at this time. Seneca did speak for the equality of all men, even slaves. We know that, in 61 A.D., there was a popular protest. A master had been murdered and, under Roman law, the slaves of this murdered man were supposed to be killed, but the populace rose up and asked why slaves had to suffer for the murder of their master. Tacitus in his *Annals* describes this event. So we see that in Rome there was some good nature moving within, but at this point, Rome was already in decline. There were some stoic influences, such as Seneca, but the large majority of those who enjoyed goods lived in luxury, indulged in literature, pursued the corruption of the legal courts, enjoyed themselves at the theater, and dabbled with philosophy for entertainment and pastime. You know the main rule in the Roman Empire was “bread and circuses.” In America we might say, “snacks and football games.” The rulers believed that as long as they gave the people food and distraction, they could control them. It is amazing how modern the Romans were! A moral decay was already happening in the Roman Empire.

Paul was speaking, in Romans 12-15, very clearly for a moral uprightness in Rome; not in a Stoic way, but in a Gospel way. How is a godly life possible? Where does it grow out of? You have to think deeply and you must begin and end with the Gospel—not begin with the Gospel and end with Stoic rectitude and correct conduct. You see the moral decay in Rome. I remember my Latin teacher being moved to tears when he had to tell us about the moral decay. He thought that Rome was such a great empire. They accomplished so many wonderful things, but they lost their strength by internal immorality and corruption and by compromising their legal system. The western world seems to be repeating this history.

What else can we say about Rome? You need to imagine Rome as a multi-racial and multi-ethnic city of world stature. It is predominately a world of slaves. There are some freedmen, some of whom chose to stay with their former masters, which does not justify slavery. Rome is filled with world religions. In addition to “bread and circus,” there is emperor worship. The Roman Empire absorbed so many people that they had to find a common denominator for all these. If you eradicate religion, you strike a sensitive cord of human existence. Communism has demonstrated to us that Augustine was right when he said that man is an unchangeable worshiper. If you do not let man worship, you will be in deep trouble. The Roman leadership understood that, so they attempted to unify the religious practices of all these various people groups, from Persians to pagans, with the worship of the emperor. The Jews were an exception to that. There were even specific laws that exempted them from particular taxes because they were paying

temple taxes. This perhaps explains the persecution of Jews, before the Christians were in Rome, under Caligula.

Emperor worship was a simple common denominator to bring people together. For those who had no moral obligation to the God of Abraham or to the living God, it was no problem at all to worship the emperor if the emperor felt the need to be worshiped—even if they thought he was a lunatic and conceited to desire their worship, worshipping him did not compromise their morals. The Jews, however, could not do that, and neither could the Christians. That became a problem, if you could not pursue and conform to the emperor worship. Emperor worship was a simple common denominator. I remember former president Bill Clinton saying that all that matters is that you conform to the Constitution and you show up for work. I think the call for emperor worship was a simple statement like that. This is a minimalist understanding: “It does not matter what your morals are or what your life is like. If you conform to the constitution and show up for work, that is good enough.” Emperor worship was a bit like this—a very minimalist understanding of what was necessary for the state to function. In Rome, if you questioned the emperor worship, you were in trouble. We see already that there is a problem arising on the horizon.

I have mentioned that many world religions were involved in Rome. Many Jews settled there after Pompey took Palestine for Rome in 63 B.C. First they arrived as slaves, then some were freedmen. They established a synagogue, a Jewish center of learning and worship in Rome, which you can read about in Acts 6:10. Since the Exodus there is a pattern of establishing a Jewish center of reading, learning, teaching, worship, and prayer. Already Cicero, in 59 B.C., spoke of the fact that there were many Jews in Rome, and around the time of Christ’s birth thousands of Jews were reported to be living in Rome. With Caligula and anti-Jewish sentiments, in around 19 A.D., there was a more repressive movement from the Roman Empire. At that time there was already a sense of narrowing that independence of the Jewish worship. This had something to do with emperor worship, but it probably also had something to do with the Roman games. The Jews participated in the economic part of Roman life, but because some of these games were very rough (slaves had to give their lives for the entertainment of people), I believe the Jews hesitated in participating in that kind of life. They were already isolating themselves. When a minority group isolates itself and questions the predominant culture or does not participate in what everyone else is doing, there is struggle. That is a sociological phenomenon and we have that in Rome, at least in the time of Caligula.

We know that in 52 A.D. the Jews were expelled from Rome because there was trouble in Rome. Emperor Claudius, the successor of Caligula, threw out the Jews. If we take Acts 18 too literally, we may get the impression that all the Jews were thrown out. We read in Acts 18:2 that “There [Paul] met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome.” If you do not read that in context, you might think that it refers to every single Jew. If you read a little bit about the situation, as Suetonius in particular describes it, we learn that there was an uprising, a tension among Jews in a Jewish province. When the Roman emperor saw that there was trouble that he did not understand, he just threw the troublemakers out. What was the tension? Suetonius says that there was a tumult at the instigation of a “Chrestus.” Many scholars believe that this is the mis-rendering of “Christ” and that it is a misreading that there was a leader within this group, Chrestus, who instigated that difference. It is a more plausible reading that some of these Jews were Christians who confessed Christ as Lord and others were Jews who did not. There was an inner-Jewish rift in Rome in A.D. 52 that led to the expulsion of those trouble-making Jews. So I would suggest that Acts 18:2 should not be read in an absolute sense, but that all those who caused trouble, especially those who belonged to this “Chrestus” movement—Aquila and Priscilla among them—were thrown out.

There was a growing concern within the Jewish group and within Rome over this Chrestus movement—over those who belonged to Christ. I think that is what we need to know about the general situation in Rome and the various people living there.