

## Introduction to Romans

This morning we're beginning our study of Romans. Thinking about this, my memory was drawn back to September 1968 and my first ever lecture at Queens, it was in Chemistry - my main subject. There were 200 of us undergrads, fresh faced though still spotty, crammed into the lecture theatre LG 34 in the DKB. At 8:55 a figure entered the lecture theatre. He had long hair and a long straggly beard. He was wearing the mankiest lab coat I have ever seen. He introduced himself, I am not the one, who is to come, I am he who comes before the one who is to come. He quickly outlined the timetable for our practical classes for the coming semester and exited stage left. Whereupon the one who was to come arrived.

So in less grandiose terms, I'm setting the scene this morning and next week the Rev. Johnny will get into the meat of this letter. Wow! Romans is huge, it's magnificent, it's powerful. It's more of extended essay than a letter. It has been described as the clearest, most systematic, exposition of Christian doctrine. Its themes range from sin through to salvation and everything in between. But in essence it's the basic gospel message - God's plan of salvation and the righteousness of God, and from God, for all humankind Jew and gentile alike all made possible through the death, resurrection and exaltation of our Lord Jesus Christ. Of course the bible has the power to transform lives and equip us to achieve great things for God. Here are some of the saints who have been touched specifically by reading Romans. St. Augustine, on his conversion after reading Rom. 13vs13-14. At the end of these verses a clear light flooded my heart and all the darkness of doubt vanished away. Luther's conversion. These verses of Paul in Rom. 1vs16-17 became to me a gateway into heaven. John Wesley's conversion. After listening to Luther's preface to Romans I felt my heart strangely warmed and an assurance given me that Christ had taken away my sins, even mine.

We know Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, wrote a sizeable chunk of the NT. 13 letters in all, from Romans through to Philemon. It's not particularly relevant, but it is unlikely these letters are in chronological order. If they were, Romans would probably appear in the middle of the list. It is difficult to be precise, it is believed Paul wrote to the house churches in Rome during his third missionary journey, about 57AD. That's about three years before he arrived in Rome in chains. He probably wrote it from Corith whilst wintering there, before his return to Jerusalem with a large cash gift donated by the churches in Macedonia Achaia and Asia for the poverty-stricken believers in Jerusalem. As he writes at that time, neither Paul, nor any of the other apostles, had visited Rome, or planted any churches there. It's unknown if Paul had met any of the Roman house church leaders face to face during his other travels. In passing, who did plant the churches at Rome? Well, Acts 2v10-11, tells us that on the day of Pentecost there were visitors from Rome both Jews and converts to Judaism. Were they among the 3000 converts baptised that day and took the gospel back to Rome? As we open the letter, Paul carefully sets out his credentials with Christ Jesus front and centre. Our Lord's name appears five times in the opening 8 verses. Paul presents himself, not as an eminent OT scholar or an evangelist extraordinaire that had planted churches throughout the Roman provinces of the Eastern Med but as a servant/slave of Christ Jesus. The people of Rome would be all too aware of the lot of a slave - no rights, no home of their own, no possessions of their own. But Paul is **freely** surrendered to the service of Jesus, his King. He continues that he is an apostle - one sent under authority of the Lord and by the Lord with the commission to be a preacher. A preacher of the gospel

of God, a gospel originating in God - not of human invention. He is a missionary to the Gentiles. He has been set apart by God for God. He is set apart from the world and everything in it. Paul as a former Pharisee set himself apart for the observance of the law, but on his conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul knew God had set him apart for the gospel. So why did Paul write this letter? From Acts, it was Paul's practise to move out from his base in Syrian Antioch and travel deep into the Roman provinces, planting churches as he travelled. On his return journey to Antioch, he would endeavour to revisit those planted churches to encourage them and add new converts to them. If problems, or disagreements, or issues regarding false doctrine arose in those churches Paul would address them in person or by letters preserved for us in the NT. For Paul, the church in Rome was a blank canvas. He knew the church had not received the teaching of an apostle, so he was unsure what teaching they had received and any potential gaps in their understanding. Hence, he uses the letter as an opportunity to expound the gospel systematically and in full as we said before.

This situation also takes me back to my yesterdays and my transition from O level to A level. Our new chemistry teacher checked our o level chemistry grades. In the class of 20 pupils the grade were mostly 1s with a few grade 2s. So he immediately plunged into the A level syllabus. But not so in physics, our new teacher discovered that in the same group less than half the class had grade 1s and 2s in physics. The majority, including myself, had grade 3s. After a few questions he was appalled at the gaps in our knowledge. (Maybe he shouldn't have been! Our O level physics teacher graduated before Chadwick discovered the neutron in 1935). Anyway like Paul our teacher went back to basics, and he retaught the whole O level syllabus over one month before moving on to the A level teaching. Paul knew Rome was the most influential city on earth at that time. It was a microcosm and the capital of the Roman Empire. All the peoples of the civilised world were represented there, Jews, Greeks, Romans, and barbarians. Note: barbarians are not hoodlums simply non-Greek speakers. It was the one place, where it was essential the Christian gospel was properly taught and understood. If a bogus Christianity ruled in Rome, the whole world would be in danger. How prophetic! Paul also takes an opportunity in this introduction to prepare the way for his planned visit. The Christians in Rome fell under his Apostolic jurisdiction, and he wanted to assure them he had not wilfully neglected them. His previous plans to visit had been thwarted. He tells them, I thank God for all of you. I remember you constantly in my prayers. I pray I may come to you. I long to see you. I planned many times to come to you. He also longed to encourage them and strengthen them and to be encouraged and strengthened by them. (I'm sure the folks that went to Tarragona this summer would agree mission is a two-way process: blessing others and being blessed by them, strengthening others, and being strengthened by them.) Paul is eager to preach the gospel in Rome. He doesn't plan to come as a sightseer but as a soul winner. In fact as an apostle to the Gentiles he feels he's in their debt, until he preaches to them in person. In summary, Paul writes because the church in Rome must comprehend the world's need of the gospel, to understand the gospel's message, to experience the gospel and receive its glorious freedom.

He writes to reveal God's sacrificial love for them and how they should respond in obedience to that love. An obedience inspired through faith, faith in the faithful one, our Lord Jesus Christ. And so reading Romans today. Like all scripture the message in Romans is timeless. The good news has not changed. Reading Romans should remind us to trust in

Christ, and to obey Christ. True trust in our hearts brings obedience in our lives. The gospel message is a call to faith, and also, the way we can grow in faith.

The letter reminds us of God's gospel declaration that Jesus is his Son, the promised King, raised with power, to rule in power, who invites us into his Kingdom to enjoy the blessings of his rule. Romans declares the nature of God, as righteous but also gracious. Through faith in Him we enjoy grace from him and peace with him. William Tynedale, the bible translator into English says of Romans, no man in truth can read it too oft or study it too well, for the more it is studied the easier it is, the more it is chewed the pleasanter it is, and the more groundly it is searched the preciser things are found in it, so great treasures of spiritual things lieth hid therein. During the summer I read Jack Deere's book, Why I am still surprised by the power of the spirit. He reflects on teaching, Most people come to church with worries, concerns, and anxieties. They know they don't pray enough, don't witness enough, don't study the Bible enough, or do any of the spiritual disciplines enough. Then they hear a sermon about praying more, witnessing more, and studying the Bible more and they leave church feeling worse than when they came in. Point taken. Lesson learned! God speaks to us through our reading of his Word, through listening to others preach, through creation, through our conscience mediated by the Holy Spirit, through Christian friends, and by his still small voice during prayer and meditation.

Can I encourage us all to read Romans prayerfully ourselves as we follow this sermon series. If you still feel I am sending you out on a guilt trip, let me temper this by reading my favourite verse from Romans it's 8v38-39, I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Can I add not doing the spiritual disciplines enough. Believers, we are loved by God, we are recipients of grace and peace from God our Father, and from his son the Lord Jesus Christ. We need to get used to this, but we should never get over it. Amen.