

# Romans Introduction

by Branson Williams

The book of Romans is placed in our New Testaments as the first epistle, after the four gospels and the historical book of Acts. Written by the apostle Paul on his third missionary journey from Corinth, Romans is the most lengthy of Paul's epistles. Commentators often view Romans as "the fullest explanation of the gospel of Christ" or some similar statement like "Paul's Gospel letter." Dewelt commented on Romans placement within the New Testament by writing, "In Acts we are told what to do to be justified; in Romans we are told of the 'how' and 'why' of justification."<sup>1</sup> These observations are in accord with the text of Romans which provides a comprehensive summary of man's need of salvation and God's provisions to make salvation available.

Romans can be generally divided in terms of doctrinal (chapters 1-11), practical (chapters 12-15) and personal (chapter 16) sections. Paul's epistle to the saints in Rome undoubtedly contains what Peter referred to as "some things hard to understand." (cf. 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter 3:16) Among these are the subjects of God's election, the role of the Holy Spirit in a Christian's life as well as complexities on subjects we may regard as elementary such as faith and law. The epistle also defines more theological terms and concepts than any book in the Bible, including:

- Propitiation (3:23-25)
- Justification (5:1)
- Sanctification (6:1-13)
- Intercession (8:26-27)
- Transformation (12:1-2)

While "weighty" subjects may challenge us, a study of the epistle of Romans should not focus on the complex to the neglect of the more familiar subjects. The inspired apostle wrote simple but profound truths of God on the all important subject of salvation. To miss this would be to miss the most important subject in all the New Testament! The words "righteousness," "faith," "law," "all" and "sin" *each* occur at least sixty times in Romans. We can discover deeper meaning in such familiar terms in Romans. We can then examine ourselves in the light of the Bible's explanation of those terms.

Regarding the state of mind the apostle Paul had when writing Romans, chapter 15 brings a few things to light as he writes from Corinth. Paul expresses his regrets to have been hindered in coming to Rome (15:22-23) as also mentioned in 1:13. He reveals his plans of traveling west to Spain and he hopes to come to Rome at that time. However he is presently planning to visit Jerusalem to deliver relief in the form of an offering from the Gentile churches, notably Macedonia and Achaia. He has anxiety in not knowing what "the disobedient in Judea" may have in store for him and he requests the prayers of the saints in Rome on his behalf (15:31). Writing such an epistle at this time is remarkable, and we stand in awe of the apostle's commitment to the Lord Jesus in the face of great toil and grave dangers.

<sup>1</sup>Don DeWelt, "Romans Realized," 1959, College Press, page 13.

## **The Church at Rome**

The beginning of the church in Rome is not recorded in the New Testament. This is unusual, for Paul says he has longed to visit the church in Rome for many years (cf. Romans 15:23). The time of Paul's writing in the winter of AD 57 or spring of 58 is about 25-26 years after the church was established in Jerusalem. Paul commends the brethren in Rome in regards to their faith "being proclaimed throughout the whole world" in Romans 1:8. His desire of years to visit Rome and those brethren's faith being so widely known reveal a church (or perhaps plural churches) in Rome for years at the time of Paul's writing to them.

Paul will eventually be taken to Rome as a prisoner, with the details of this described in the last 5 chapters of Acts. By God's providence he is able to preach the gospel as a Roman prisoner and he also wrote 4 epistles during his imprisonment (Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians and Philemon).

Concerning the beginning of a church in the capitol of the Roman Empire, "visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes" of Acts 2:10 could have been a part, if not the beginning, of the church in Rome. These Roman visitors had traveled to Jerusalem and on the day of Pentecost they heard the Spirit-inspired apostles preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That day, more than 3,000 souls in the city of Jerusalem were the first to be added to the church by the Lord as recorded in Acts 2:47. Many of those visitors returned to their cities at some point. Further, those who still remained in Jerusalem at the time of Stephen's death (Acts 7) were "scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria" due to such persecution (cf. Acts 8:2). These factors support a reasonable conclusion that some of the first Christians returned to their home city of Rome, taking their faith to the capital of the Empire.

Another view is found in Sanday's commentary on Romans<sup>2</sup>. He curiously dismisses Christians returning to Rome from Jerusalem. His explanation is that regular travelers to Rome, especially from those cities in which Paul preached, carried the faith to Rome. His comments are worthy of consideration. In the end, we have no definitive information on the origin of the church in Rome.

Key among the ties of Paul with the church in Rome is his connection to Priscilla and Aquila (Romans 16:3). This couple was found by Paul upon his arrival in Corinth, having left Rome because of the decree of the Emperor Claudius in AD 52 (cf. Acts 18:1-2). Paul stayed with the Christian couple for 18 months as he evangelized the city and built up the saints as they were added to the Lord's church (Acts 18:1-2). Evidently, Aquila and Priscilla found their way to back to Rome. Paul knew they were in Rome so he sent his greetings to the couple as well as the church which met in their house (Romans 16:3-5).

In Romans chapter 16, of the 28 persons of the church mentioned 14 are Jewish, 4 are Latin and 10 are Greek names<sup>2</sup> who were well known to Paul even though in the capacity of an apostle he had never set foot in Rome when he wrote Romans. As the saying goes, "All roads lead to Rome." The road system developed throughout the Roman Empire afforded opportunity for Paul to have met these Christians in major cities such as Corinth (as was the case with Aquila and Priscilla) and Ephesus, cities in which he spent over 4 years associated with his apostolic missions.

<sup>2</sup>"The Epistle to the Romans," Sanday and Hedlam, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, 1902.