

No.12. The Book of Romans

The origins of the NT congregation in the city of Rome are shrouded in mystery. Certainly Paul was not the founder of it. Note vs. 10-13 which make it clear that he had never seen the believers in Rome prior to this point in time. Indeed, v.13 reveals that he had often resolved to go to Rome but had always been hindered in his purposes. Thus, he was not the founder of the congregation in the capital of the empire.

The church there had been formed some time prior to the writing of this letter, v.7. Yet he was familiar with many of the members of the congregation as the final chapter shows, for there he asks to be remembered to such people. In some cases there were those who laboured with him. V.1 – Phebe, a lady who gave notable service to Christ in the church at Cenchrea, see Acts 18: 18. Thus Paul would have known *Phebe* there but now she is in Rome. V.5 – a man named *Epaenetus* one of the first converts in Achaia, the area of Greece where Corinth was situated. See vs.3-5 – Priscilla and Aquila; cp. Acts 18: 2-3 which records Paul's initial meeting with this couple and the friendship formed. Then vs. 18 & 19 – left Corinth with Paul and were left by him at Ephesus, indicating that they must have settled there. See 1 Cor 16: 19 – at this point they are still in *Asia*, the area where Ephesus was situated, so the Ephesian church would be included in the term "*the churches of Asia salute you.*" Note also that while in Ephesus a church met in their home. It would seem from Rom 16: 3-5 that they must have returned to Rome and once more opened up their home to house a Christian congregation indicating that there probably was more than one congregation in the city of Rome.

Thus, Paul was familiar with many in Rome, who were from other places, were notable Christians but had gone to Rome, undoubtedly taking the Gospel with them to that city and seeing the church formed there. See Acts 2: 10 – "*strangers of Rome.*" Thus, there were present at Pentecost some Jews who were resident in Rome; and perhaps through their conversion they carried the Gospel back with them to Rome assisting also in the formation of the church there. As a church it had a very clear testimony "*your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world,*" ch.1: 8 – that is, in the churches scattered through the world of that day. Paul did eventually see the realisation of his desire to visit Rome, in that he went there as a prisoner, Acts 28: 16 – but was able to carry on a ministry there, vs. 30 & 31.

But before he eventually went to Rome he ministered to the church there by means of this great epistle. Rome was a strategic city, a centre of influence & power being the capital of the empire. Thus, it presented great potential for further dissemination of the Gospel into other more distant regions. There is no doubt that this letter to the Romans not only prepared the way for Paul's visit to Rome, but its message would also have spread far and wide to the blessing of many in that period.

For a quarter of a century before Paul wrote this epistle to the Romans, the Gospel had been spreading throughout the Roman Empire. As the Gospel spread it resulted, of course, in the formation of many churches. But it was inevitable that with the passing of time and spread & success of the Gospel, many questions would have arisen among the converts in the churches. For that reason the epistles were written – to deal with problems & questions that inevitably arose among the Lord's people.

Different epistles deal with different issues; and as far as Romans is concerned it was written to address some unique issues. But the central matter that this epistle addresses is the doctrine of justification. Therefore, *Romans* is the most formal, theological and logical statement of God's way of justification in all Scripture. For this reason Martin Luther declared that Romans is the chief book in the entire NT and ought to be known word by word by every child of God. In focusing on the doctrine of justification *Romans* centres on the very heart of the Gospel – the free justification of sinners in the sight of God.

KEY TEXT

The key text of the epistle is ch.1: 17. Note in v.16 Paul's declaration that he is not ashamed of the Gospel. Then he states "*For therein is the righteousness of God revealed.*" The Gospel, therefore, is a revelation of this righteousness of God – but what is that righteousness? It is not God's own personal attribute of righteousness. The term may signify such; and in Romans sometimes it does, see ch.3: 5, 26 – in these verses "the righteousness of God" is a reference to His eternal attribute of justice. But that is not what the term means in 1: 17 for this simple reason – faith in the truth that God is just does not save or justify anyone. Nowhere in Scripture does the Spirit of God tell sinners that by believing that God is righteous or just in His own being they will be saved. Those who are justified certainly believe that God is just, but the focus or the object of their saving faith is not the quality of divine righteousness or justice.

Rather, the term as used in 1: 17 refers to the righteousness that God provides for sinners as the basis or ground of acceptance with Him. As ch.5 especially shows, the righteousness that God provides for sinners is specifically the righteousness that results from Christ's perfect obedience given both in His life and His death, a righteousness that is imputed freely to all who believe in the Saviour. Thus, the epistle to the Romans is essentially the out-working of this great statement in 1: 17 that the Gospel is the revelation of the righteousness that justifies the ungodly and gives them acceptance with God.

MAN'S NEED FOR THIS JUSTIFYING RIGHTEOUSNESS

This righteousness that justifies sinners takes full account of their sin. Note in v.18 that Paul immediately focuses on man's sinful state. There is the root of his sinfulness – he is ungodly; and then there is the fruit of his sinfulness – he is unrighteous. In the following few chapters Paul develops these two facts of man's ungodliness and his unrighteousness by majoring on the doctrine of human depravity. He shows that man's depravity manifests itself in two ways: first, in the wickedness of man's sin, ch.1: 19-32; second, in the wickedness of man's self-righteousness, ch.2-3: 8. Thus, Paul's great conclusion is that the entire world of humanity is guilty, 3: 19 and through no self-effort can ever be justified, 3: 20.

GOD'S PROVISION OF JUSTIFYING RIGHTEOUSNESS

Immediately after his verdict that all are guilty and incapable of being justified through self-effort, Paul commences his great exposition of this righteousness of God by which sinners are justified, 3: 21. It is manifested or revealed which means that it is righteousness outside of man, not of his making or even merited by him. It is received by faith alone, 3: 22; and the reception of it results in the free justification of the sinner, v.24. These are the basic lines of thought that Paul develops and enlarges through the rest of this epistle. He shows that justification through Christ's righteousness brings us into union with Christ, results in holiness of life and thereby enables us to serve the Lord throughout the rest of our days.