

ROMANS - #1A

ANTIOCH BIBLE CLASS

ROMANS 1:1-17

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CHURCH AT ROME

MEMORY VERSE: ROM. 1:7. To all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

INTRODUCTION

With this lesson we embark on a study of the epistle of Paul written to the Roman church. This will be a challenging undertaking. The epistle, which translators subsequently divided into 16 chapters, covers a very broad range of topics relating to the entire Christian experience. In addition, the very fact of this broad range of topics means that we can expect to encounter conflicting opinions relative to its many subjects. The book contains a depth of wisdom and revelation from God which requires much more than a cursory reading of its pages in order to understand its messages. Notwithstanding the formidable task its study presents to us, it also brings a fulfilling and commensurate reward for everyone who will sufficiently invest their passion, hunger and searching of its rivers of treasures and spiritual blessings.

Following, as it does, our lessons from the Book of Acts, which ended with Paul in Rome ministering the gospel there and also suffering martyrdom there, this book can be a great sequel in spiritual growth. We shall find its emphasis on a variety of pertinent Christian topics such as: The depravity of man, grace, faith, "predestination", Jew and Gentile, civil duties, practical Christian living and more, to be of rich interest and of every day personal application.

May the Lord guide and inspire our journey through the story of Christianity as Paul described it to the church at Rome.

DAILY SCRIPTURE READINGS AND COMMENTS.

MONDAY. A LOOK AT THE ROMAN WORLD IN WHICH THE CHURCH WAS FOUNDED.

COMMENTS.

The Roman world into which Christ was born in the days of Caesar Augustus, was the ruling power in that day above all others. Thirty years later the church of Christ was born on the day of Pentecost, still under the yoke to Rome. It was this yoke that Jews were looking so strongly for some leader to come along and deliver them from. The dominion of Rome covered the Mediterranean world, extending northward to the Danube River; south into Africa and Egypt; eastward to Mesopotamia and westward including Spain, Gallia and Britannia. Palestine was under Roman rule.

Rome was noted for her legendary armies; her wonderful roads, such as the Appian way, aqueducts, Colosseum, Pantheon, the temple to every god and much more. There are estimates of her population from 800000 to 4000000; 1,000000 is probably a safe estimate. The religion of Rome was entwined into every facet of their everyday life. Virtually every home had a place in it for their idols and recognition of their gods, of which there were many. In addition, many of the Caesars were also worshipped as gods. The empire of Rome existed from 146 B.C. until 395 AD, when it was divided into eastern and western empires. Then in 476 A.D., the western portion fell; actually its reigns were voluntarily surrendered to the eastern empire.

It was into this pagan empire that the church entered about 30 A.D. Three centuries later, pagan Rome had become Christianized Rome. Unfortunately, it was Christianity with a distinct pagan emphasis.

TUESDAY. THE ORIGIN OF THE CHURCH AT ROME.

COMMENTS.

According to commentators, at the time Paul wrote this letter he was in Corinth, not long before his last journey to Jerusalem. This is believed to be between 56 and 58 A.D., during the reign of the emperor Nero (54 to 68 AD). By the time he wrote the epistle, God had spoken to him twice, telling him that he must witness for him in Rome. Paul had never visited Rome or the church there. However it may surprise you to know that he had many acquaintances there, many of which we will later name. Paul desired to visit Rome to leave them some spiritual blessing. From all credible evidence it does not appear that any apostle (including Peter) had ever visited Rome or been involved in a church there before this time.

There is no evidence that the Apostle Peter had ever visited Rome or been involved in its founding and its ministry. Peter apparently did go to Rome near the end of Nero's reign and was crucified there according to tradition. Peter never put himself forward as the head of the whole church or ever referred to himself as being the infallible spokesman for the church, as the pope does. All of the claims of apostolic succession by the Roman Catholic Church, with Peter being the first pope and all of the exaggerated claims attached to that, are purely figments of imagination and are not true.

There is an interesting story relative to the existence of the church at Rome to which Paul was writing, that I think we should share. First, there does not appear to be any valid, specific date that can be given as the time of the exact founding of this church like you can for others. The first and obvious introduction of the message of a risen savior would have come from those who were in attendance at

Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. Acts 2:10, tells us that people from Rome were there on that day. It would be contrary to every impulse of the Christian experience to think that these people went back to Rome and never mentioned their experience, especially since it is entirely possible that some of them received the baptism of the Holy Ghost on that day. Possibly they had been back to Jerusalem on other occasions with opportunities to attend church there. Thus the oldest roots for a church at Rome would have come from their experience on the day of Pentecost. That possibly could have been the beginning of the church at Rome, but there is no absolute proof of that.

Another part of the story of the church at Rome surfaces in the 18th chapter of Acts. In Acts 18:1-3, Paul comes from Athens to Corinth. There he finds (already abiding there) that faithful couple, Aquila and Priscilla. They had "lately" come from Rome, because the emperor drove all the Jews from that place. Paul abides with them and they make tents together. Some commentators assume that they were not already Christians and were converted by Paul. Others think that they were Christians in Rome. It is doubtful that Paul would have joined in with them and lived with them if they had not already been followers of Christ. The time of the founding of the church at Corinth is thought to be about 52 A.D., approximately 5 years before Paul wrote his epistle to the Roman church.

I am of the opinion that Aquila and Priscilla were Christians in Rome. They apparently were of the same approximate age group as Paul was. There is evidence that they must have been members of a church in Rome, as we shall soon see. There are several references to Aquila and Priscilla in the scriptures and I am going to reproduce them here for you to share.

- Acts 18:2-3, & 18-19 & 24-26. And found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla, (because that Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome;) and came unto them. And because he was of the same craft, he abode with them, and wrought, for by their occupation they were tentmakers. – And Paul after this tarried there yet a good while, and then took his leave of the brethren, and sailed thence into Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila: having shorn his head in Cenchrea for he had a vow. And he came to Ephesus, and left them there.....24-26. And a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, and eloquent man and mighty in the scriptures, came to Ephesus. This man was instructed in the way of the Lord: and being fervent in the spirit, he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord, knowing only the baptism of John. And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue: whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly.
- Rom. 16:3-5. Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus: Who have for my life laid down their own necks: unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Likewise greet the church that is in their house.. (Note: As we have indicated, Paul wrote this letter between 56 and 58 A.D. In it he sends greetings to Aquila and Priscilla in Rome at the time. Above, in Acts 18: 2-3, when Paul first met them, that was around 52 A.D. Thus when first seeing them when they came from Rome, it was about 52 A.D., now approximately 5 years later, they are returned to Rome, with a church in their house. Their roots must be in Rome. You have to wonder if they were in Rome when Paul got there and if they were part of the company that greeted them at Appii Forum.

- I Cor. 16:19. The churches of Asia salute you. Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, with the church that is in their house.
- II Tim. 4:19. Salute Prisca and Aquila, and the household of Onesiphorus.

These verses reveal a genuine closeness between Paul and Aquila and Priscilla. It also shows them as being in Rome very much, and with a church in their house. Notice one more thing in the entire 16th chapter of Romans: It gives a long list of individuals who, at the time of Paul's writing of the letter, were in Rome, but at other times had been where Paul was and were dearly acquainted with him. So he may never have been in Rome, but he knew a lot of people there who were devoted Christians, many of whom had labored with him before. This puts much more purpose and meaning in the long letter he wrote to them.

WEDNESDAY. ROMANS 1:1-7. A LETTER TO THE SAINTS AT ROME.

SCRIPTURE.

V1. Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God. 2. (Which he had promised afore by his prophets in the holy scriptures.) 3. Concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh: 4. And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead: 5. By whom we have received grace and apostleship, for obedience to the faith among all nations, for his name. 6. Among whom are ye also the called of Jesus Christ: 7. To all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints: grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

COMMENTS.

Paul begins this letter with an introduction of himself, which is also his "resume": A servant of Jesus Christ – called to be an apostle – separated unto the gospel of God. No worldly or religious titles, just a man called to be a servant of the gospel. The gospel I preach was promised by the prophets and was about Jesus, a descendent from the lineage of David. This same Jesus was declared to be the Son of God by the spirit of holiness and by his resurrection from the dead. He shares with Roman Christians that the same grace he has received is that which they have also received.

"To all who are called to be saints at Rome". We don't feel called to be saints today, unless it is some unscriptural crowning of our own elected persons that we give this designation to. In truth, every one that is a Christian is called to be a saint of God. Alas, the term is so opposite the culture and norm of today, that we would be embarrassed to be called a saint, let alone not meeting its criteria. Perhaps some would argue that we don't deserve to be called to be saints, but neither did the Romans. Okay, I am satisfied for Christians not be called that, but I am not satisfied for Christians not to live like that.

Though Paul introduced himself as a "servant", implying a lower status of life, yet he was a very learned man. As we look further into his letter to the Roman Church, just how learned he really was will be more manifest. The book is written with much depth of spiritual understanding, yet is presented so that the passionate student will be much inspired and enlightened.

THURSDAY. ROMANS 1:8-15. WHY DID PAUL WANT TO GO TO ROME.

SCRIPTURES.

V8. First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world. 9. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers: 10. Making request, if by any means now at length I might have a prosperous journey by the will of God to come unto you. 11. For I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established: 12. That is, that I may be comforted together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me. 13. Now I would not have you ignorant, brethren, that oftentimes I purposed to come unto you, (but was let hitherto) that I might have some fruit among you also, even as among other Gentiles. 14. I am debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians: both to the wise, and to the unwise. 15. So, as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also.

COMMENTS.

Paul is engaged in “continual” prayers for the church at Rome. This expression about continual prayers for them is not just a routine cliché or by-word. He really did pray continually for them. Again, if you review chapter 16 and the list of personal acquaintances he had in Rome at that time, it will put more emphasis on his prayers for the church there. Sometimes we tell people that they are “in our prayers” when in reality we do not mention them when (and if) we pray. Its just a good sound bite.

Paul wanted to visit the church at Rome, not to tour its fabled sites such as the colosseum, Pantheon, etc. He wanted to go there just for the spiritual benefit of the church and the gospel; doing that he too would benefit.

FRIDAY. ROMANS 1:16-17. THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL.

SCRIPTURES.

V16. For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth: to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. 17. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, the just shall live by faith.

COMMENTS.

Paul makes a profound expression of confidence in his faith in Christ when he said, “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ”. It was much more than that though. Several powerful realities are contained in that statement.

- I am totally committed to the gospel message of a resurrected Christ.
- I have suffered the loss of all things and endured every possible hardship for the sake of the gospel.

- I have demonstrated my apostleship in all the world.
- I have taught and warned every church, often from house to house, about every precept of the gospel.
- I have confronted unbelieving Jews with the gospel and it always has proven to be just what God wanted me to preach.
- I have confronted the pagan world again and again and the gospel alone can deliver them from their sins.
- It is through this gospel the both Jew and Gentile can be saved from their sins.

Paul looked forward to a visit to Rome so that he might further establish their faith and obedience to the blessed gospel of Christ.

SUMMARY

With a long list of Christian brothers and sisters in Rome, many who had labored with him at one place or another, it is no wonder that Paul wrote such a complete letter to the church there. It is about 58 A.D. when he writes, approximately three or four years before he finally arrives there. Paul writes to “all who are called to be saints” at Rome, and expresses his deep desire to visit Rome and have some fruit in the church there unto the Lord.

His letter kindly embraces everyone in Rome that is connected to the gospel and the church. That is his total mission. When he finally arrives there, it will not be as much establishing new churches as it will be the strengthening and building up of the Christians already there. Nevertheless, there is ample evidence that his message in Rome also bore the fruit of new converts to Christianity.

How often the phrase, “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ”, has been quoted. With all the ridicule, despite, hate, criticism and blasphemy against the message Paul preached, it appears that it only made him appreciate it more, rather than discourage him from his task. At Rome he can expect to come in contact with many who will only despise him further. It did not bother Paul. He was doing the will of God and nothing else mattered.

Now he has begun a long letter to some very dear friends and co-laborers in the Lord. He has much to say.

QUESTIONS

1. Why did Paul write a letter to Rome?
2. When did he write it?
3. Who did he write it to?
4. Since he had never been to Rome, how did he know any people there?
5. What did he mean by the statement that he was not ashamed of the gospel of Christ?