

When in Rome: Introduction

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[0 : 00] Welcome here for this Sunday, April 12th. My name is Kent Dixon, and it is my joy to be the pastor here.! Folks, here we are.

So after hearing me talk about, oh, one day maybe we'll look at this. You know, we're in Acts for five years or however long that went on. You know, maybe we'll get to Romans at some point.

And I talked about that was my goal. And so here we are. Uh, hopefully you see this and go, yay, another cool series. Digging into scripture, digging into ancient words, which I said to Len, what a perfect song to lead right into this, because I was deeply moved listening to the words of that hymn, because these are ancient words that we're about to explore together, but they are forever true indeed.

And we're going to see how that is. So we're going to be digging into the book of Romans together. Now I'm estimating this will be roughly six months-ish. So not a year and a half like Acts was.

It'll be a little bit more concise, but it will in some ways be heavier. So we're going to work through that together as well. And our series is titled When in Rome.

[1 : 14] That phrase just kind of caught in my mind, and I thought that's what we would go with. So it's not lost on me that our study of this book and its foundational messages about the gospel and Christian life come right after we have been reminded of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

That series of events we've just been reminded of, its power to redeem and change lives is central to our faith. And we've talked about that a bit in some of our Easter messages.

So I have a confession to make. The prospect of leading us through a survey of Romans is daunting to me. I'm not taking it lightly.

And so God and I have had a few conversations where I've said, Lord, so many more knowledgeable, more experienced people have worked their way through this book and presented the truths of this book, and I don't know if I'm up to the task.

But he said, I don't care, because I will lead you, and you will lead my people. So it's daunting, I'll be honest. And then I want to be clear that I'm going to be learning with you on this journey.

[2 : 28] Do I know the book of Romans? Yes. Do I have a deep appreciation for the Apostle Paul and all of his writing? Yes. But I'm also very humbled by the fact that this is the book of Romans.

And I've had conversations with people as we've been talking about the series, and they've said, I love Romans. Romans is where I find my favorite verses and all of these things.

The meaning and the messages of Romans are so powerful. So again, I'm going to be learning with you on this journey, and I'm going to be constantly seeking the Lord's guidance for what he wants us to learn together.

I hope that sounds okay. So over the course of this series, we're going to be spending time exploring the messages of encouragement and also conviction that it contains.

We're also going to reflect on some of the ways that we can incorporate those messages into our lives. So where's the best place to start?

[3 : 25] How about with an introduction? And for those of you who know Romans well, hopefully you learned some new things. For those of you who don't know the background, I hope this is good for you and enjoyable for you.

So this morning, we're going to spend some time together on an introduction to the book of Romans, as well as some of the important background information and context, as well as an overview of its structure.

So as you likely know, several of the writings that we know as books were originally written as what? Letters. So from the writer to a specific audience at a specific time and in a specific place.

Biblical books that were letters are often referred to as what? Epistles. Excellent. The word epistle comes from the Greek word epistole, which is just fun to say.

That means letter or message. So that's the origin of that word. And epistles were a primary form of written communication in the ancient world, especially during the New Testament time.

[4 : 38] And since many of the New Testament books were originally written as letters to churches or individuals, they're referred to broadly as the epistles. So you hear about the epistle to the Romans, the epistle to the Ephesians.

These are letters written by an author to an audience. So with that out of the way, let's set the stage a little bit. Of the 27 books of the New Testament, I don't know if you know this or not, 21 of them were originally epistles or letters.

21 of the 27 New Testament books were originally letters. So we know from our sermon series in the book of Acts, hopefully you remember that, the church in Rome had existed for some time. And it included both Jewish and non-Jewish followers of Jesus. And the crisis for that church began when the Roman Emperor Claudius expelled all of the Jewish people from Rome, right across the board.

Then about five years later, all of those Jewish people, including many who followed Jesus, were allowed to return to Rome. And when they did, they found a church that had become non-Jewish in both its customs and its practice.

[6 : 02] So remember, followers of Jesus began as it began in the Jewish community, right? So the Jewish people who had left Rome came back and said, this Christian church that I knew doesn't resemble what I left.

So then you can see how there would be a clash of cultures, right? A lot of tension. And then by Paul's day, the Roman church was actually divided. So they were completely divided.

They disagreed about how to follow Jesus. They debated whether Jewish or non-Jewish Christians, pardon me, should observe the Sabbath, should eat kosher, should be circumcised, and other matters.

So you can see that Jewish influence in the things that the Jewish Christian church were concerned about. So Paul wrote his letter to the Roman church to accomplish a few things.

He wanted this divided community to be unified again. And then from a practical purpose, he hoped that the Roman church could also be a staging ground for a mission that he planned to do to go into Spain, further west.

[7 : 17] And so these tense circumstances in the Roman church motivated Paul to write out his fullest explanation of the gospel. The good news that announces Jesus' life, his death, and his resurrection.

Now you know how I feel about quotes. Here's one for you. Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa wrote this fantastic overview summary of Romans.

And they say, It's not a book of theology.

It's also a book of practical exhortation. The good news of Jesus Christ is more than facts to be believed. It is also a life to be lived.

A life of righteousness befitting the person who is, as Romans 3 verse 24 says, Justified freely by his, God's grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

[8 : 44] Another quote that I don't have on the screen. An author named Jack Cottrell says of Romans, In this epistle, doctrine and gospel merge.

And the result is a spiritual feast for Christians. You excited? I'm excited. I'm excited. So, who wrote Romans?

Keep your hands down. The authorship of Romans has been universally accepted. So hear that. Interestingly enough, even by Jewish sects that did not like Paul.

We don't like him, but yeah, he wrote it. They may not have liked him, but they knew his writing.

They recognized his style of debate. And so they recognized Paul as the author.

Early church theologians, Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and many other writers in the early church agreed with each other, which was probably rare, that Paul had written Romans, period.

[9 : 51] And then there's also internal evidence within the book itself. And we're going to see that. I'll highlight it more as we go in the series. But there's a lot of things within the book that support the idea of Paul being the author.

Well, first of all, you probably know this, the letter explicitly names Paul as its author. And then within the text, the verbal style, the theological emphasis, the pastoral tone, all of those elements align closely with Paul's other letters in the New Testament.

So there are echoes of Paul in Romans and 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians. These other letters that Paul wrote, there are commonalities and echoes of the same voice.

So specific features in the book include references to his ministry, his desire to visit Rome. And then there's signature doctrinal themes that Paul always espoused, justification by faith, the interaction between law and grace, and life in the spirit.

These are all themes that were important to Paul and throughout his letters. And then we also find personal remarks in the book of Romans. Travel plans, greetings from him to other people, that are consistent with and characteristic of Paul's other letters.

[11 : 22] So the consistency of doctrine and communication style reflects the thinking of the apostle Paul. We hear his voice in Romans. His style and his emphases appear consistently in the majority of New Testament epistles that bear his name.

So the evidence suggests this tone, this way of speaking, this way of thinking that is here, is also here, indicating the same author.

What about the church in Rome? I talked about it a little bit briefly in the beginning. But what do we know about the early church in Rome? Well, there aren't any significant details in the New Testament, believe it or not.

Nothing at least that pinpoints the start of the Roman church. But there's some hints that we can find in the book of Acts. And let me just highlight those quickly. Maybe you remember some.

It's possible that the visitors to Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, following Jesus' ascension, were among that group of 3,000 who were saved that we heard about in Acts.

[12 : 30] And that some of those folks later took the gospel with them back home to likely various places, some to Rome. That's possible. It could also be that among the people who left the region following the death of Stephen, remember Stephen was stoned to death.

Some of those folks may have gone to Rome and preached the gospel there. That's also possible. So the first time we read about Christians from Rome is when we learn that Aquila and Priscilla, do you remember them?

Along with all Jews, were expelled by Claudius, expelled from Rome. So then some of those folks, particularly Aquila and Priscilla, were found by Paul.

Paul met them at Corinth during his second journey. So then after traveling with Paul to Ephesus, working with the church there, remember Aquila and Priscilla went back to Rome and they hosted a church in their home.

From the greetings that Paul gives in Romans 16, it seems that there were several churches in Rome that were meeting in various people's homes, various different locations.

[13 : 41] And the names of individuals who are mentioned in Scripture suggest that the Christians were mainly Gentiles, with a smaller number of Jews as well.

So there's just some hints, some thoughts. But regardless of how it first started, the reputation of Christians in Rome was widespread. Both their faith and obedience were recognized by Paul.

He recognized the commitment of his brothers and sisters in Rome. And so these were some of the main reasons that Paul wanted to visit these people for a long time.

He felt a kindred spirit kind of a feeling with them. And then his goal was to share in their mutual encouragement and discipleship.

So he felt they could teach him as well. He could learn from them and what they were doing. And he could also encourage and bolster them too. And then, of course, to hopefully get some help from them in his plans to minister into Spain.

[14 : 46] A little bit of a home base, as I talked about. Where and when was Romans written? The location is in the name.

Romans seems to have been written, though, when Paul was in Corinth. Gaius is a man who Paul sends greetings from. Paul seems to have lived with Gaius for a time.

Gaius lived in Corinth. So there's a connection there. Paul mentions Gaius in Romans, and they lived together in Corinth. Paul also sends greetings from a man named Erastus, who had also, we learn, settled in Corinth.

And then Phoebe, who apparently accompanied Paul's letter when it was sent to the Roman church. Remember, letters were often given or brought by a representative of the author to a church community.

So Phoebe was a lady who seems to have accompanied Paul's letter when it was sent to the Roman church. And she was from a place at a church called Sincria.

[15:54] And Sincria was actually a suburb of Corinth. So there's three pieces of Corinth, right, that echo in Romans, suggesting that that's where it was written. Now, when?

Well, Romans, scholars suggest, was written between approximately 57 and 58 AD. So Paul was on his third journey, which we learn about in Acts 20, the beginning of Acts 20.

And then just before Paul arrived with his collection for the needy saints, remember that? We talked about it in our study of Acts, that he had taken up a collection from other churches to then return to Rome to support the believers there.

So those are some of the other events that are mentioned that connect with the time. And then also the Corinth piece connecting with the place.

Why was Romans written? Did Paul just have time on his hands? Did Paul just feel like he wanted to scold someone or encourage someone?

[17:04] Well, he expresses in the letter, and we'll see this in the weeks ahead, that he had planned to preach the gospel at Rome for some time. And then, as we've talked about twice already, his plan was to then go from there into Spain.

So while that was still Paul's plan, he needed to also focus on the influence of what he refers to as Judaizing teachers.

So these were folks who were anchored in the Jewish traditions, who had started to disrupt churches in Antioch and Corinth and Galatia. And that influence, that negative influence, disruptive influence, was starting to make its way towards Rome.

So to prevent that, and to assure that his visit to Rome would be a pleasant one, Paul writes to clarify and anchor the design and nature of the gospel.

And in doing that, he demonstrates how the gospel of Christ fulfills what is lacking in both hedonism and Judaism, effectively replacing them as the dominant religious systems.

[18:21] The gospel of Jesus Christ represented something new and different. So Paul's letter would also, in some ways, arm the church in Rome against those who would pervert the gospel, who would suggest that somehow, by itself, the gospel wasn't good enough.

Paul was arguing against all of those things and giving the Roman church some resources to defend against those kinds of challenges. What is the theme of Romans?

You know this passage. Romans 1, 16 and 17. Go ahead and look it up if you like.

I hear flipping. Go for it. Romans 1, 16 and 17 says, For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ. For it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, the just shall live by faith.

[19:40] In these two verses, Paul states the confidence that he has in the gospel and the reasons for the confidence people can have in it. So the bulk of the letter of Romans is devoted to explaining why and how the gospel of Christ is God's power to save those who believe.

Period. That is the core message of Romans. How is it structured? How is it laid out? Well, I discovered two outlines that I really liked.

Having recognized some of that important background that sets the stage for the book, I want to spend some time just briefly looking at the structure. And I think these two options I'll give you are really solid for how it's laid out and how it's organized.

One outline I came across divides the structure into two sections, which I like. First half of the book is identified as what to believe.

And that's Romans 1 verse 1 to 11 36. What to believe, that section is broken down into the sinfulness of mankind, forgiveness of sin through Christ, freedom from sin's grasp, and then Israel's past, present, and future.

[21:06] And then the second half of that outline falls under how to behave. So it's basically, you've seen how Paul frames things a lot throughout, I mean, we talked about it in Acts and other places, but he says, this is what I know to be true, here's why it's true, here's how, here's the case.

Now, this should translate into how you live, how you believe, how you behave, how you operate in the world. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, this is what the gospel means for you.

Now, knowing this, live in this way. So that second half of how to behave goes from 12 verse 1 to chapter 16 verse 27, right to the end.

And this section is broken down, this outline suggested, into personal responsibility first. So again, as I just said, knowing what the gospel means, knowing how it should change your life, what's your personal responsibility for how to behave.

And then the second section, kind of the closing and wrap-up section of the book, involves a lot more personal notes from Paul. So his personal experience, greetings that he gives, and things like that.

[22 : 26] This other outline I came across is also worth noting, so we'll just look at it briefly. It seems to feature the letter S for some reason. I think sometimes authors just like alliteration or...

So, here are the sections. Six sections, beginning to end of Romans. The salutation section. What's a salutation?

Greetings and salutations. Romans 1 verse 1 to 1 verse 17. So that's Paul's, hey, I'm Paul, I'm writing you this letter, I'm writing it to you and you and you.

And hey, so-and-so says hi, and I say hi, and you say hi back to them. The salutation section. Next is sin. So Paul really digs into the concept of sin, reminding people of what it means.

Romans 1 verse 18 to chapter 3 verse 20. Next is salvation, right? Recognizing, see Paul's progression in thinking. I mean, this is the outline creator's thinking, but it's Paul's thinking, progression of Paul's thinking throughout Romans as well.

[23 : 34] So it's sin. And the need for what? A savior. So we need salvation. Romans 3 verse 21 to 5, 21.

And then what does salvation do for us? Well, it brings about sanctification. Romans 6 verse 1 to 8, 39. And then he goes into talking about the sovereignty of God.

Romans 9 verse 1 to 11, 36. And then I love how Paul wraps up Romans in those last few chapters, talking again about how, this is again how to behave, how to live according to your faith, live according to being shaped by the gospel.

So service Romans 12 verse 1 to the end of the book, 16 verse 27. All right. Everybody take a deep breath.

That was a lot. That was a lot. That was fast. So we've covered a lot in a short period of time, but just as I did with Acts, I wanted to set the stage.

[24 : 41] I wanted to give us context and some understanding before we begin to dig right into the content of the letter. Many of you know the name John Stott. He is a preacher and a theologian.

And he said this about Romans. Romans is the fullest, I prefer most full, more most full, is the fullest, plainest, and grandest statement of the gospel in the New Testament.

Its message is still as relevant and revolutionary as when it was first written. Friends, ancient words ever true.

My prayer for each of us as we walk through Romans together in the weeks ahead is that something new comes out of the familiar for you. The God reveals and reminds us of the truth of his plan that all people would come to him and that all creation will be redeemed according to his will. Amen. Amen. Amen.