

## Romans Chapter 1

Paul probably wrote this letter to the church in Rome while he was in Greece (Acts 20:2-3). The faith in the Roman church was well known (1:8), which suggests that the church there had been established for some time. We know that visitors from Rome were present at the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10-11), and it is thought they may have taken the gospel back to Rome and formed a church there but who it was exactly that formed the church is unknown. We know it wasn't Peter or Paul because Paul had never visited the church before writing this letter (1:8-13), there are no references to Peter or any of the Apostles which suggests that the church had no apostolic input at the time of this letter. The church was made of both Jews and Gentiles and 1:13 indicates there were more Gentiles than Jews. It was a concern of Paul's that the church should be a fellowship of both Jews and Gentiles and their unifying as one fellowship is a theme throughout the letter and Paul says that because of the gospel of Jesus there is no longer Jew or Gentile, all men are equal and all men need the saving grace of God equally because "*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*" (Rom. 3:23). It was also important for Paul to emphasize his apostolic credentials in order that people would recognise his authentic ministry and the gospel.

### *Verses 1-7*

Paul opens his letter in the general style of letter writing of his day. He introduces himself as a servant of Jesus and one called to be an Apostle. The word for servant *duolos* takes us back to the O.T. use of the word. Deut. 15:12-18 tells us how a person in debt was sold into servitude to a man for six years and they were set free on the seventh year. However, a servant could remain in their service if they chose to at which time they were taken to a door post and their ear was pierced with an awl as a sign of their willing service. This is the same idea that Paul is relaying here, that he is a willing servant of Jesus and called to be an Apostle. Now, in order to understand Paul's claim we have to distinguish the difference between a disciple and an Apostle.

A disciple is a student, someone who is taught by a teacher and carry his 'disciplines' and apply them throughout their lives. Jesus had hundreds of disciples but chose only twelve to be Apostles. An Apostle (*apostolos*) was someone who was sent by a king or official to represent him and an Apostle held the full weight of the office of the person who sent him. The 12 disciples included all of the men who studied under Jesus, including Judas, and when Jesus died and rose again, he sent the remaining 11 (Judas has, of course, died and was to be replaced by Matthias), out to preach the Good News (Matt 28:16-20), and later Paul was called to do the same. Jesus Himself was, of course, the first Apostle because He was sent by God to preach the message of the gospel. The basic criteria for biblical Apostleship was:

- 1) They had to have been a disciple of Jesus during His earthly ministry.
- 2) They had to be an eyewitness of the resurrection.
- 3) They had to be personally called and commissioned by Jesus.

Paul, however, did not know Jesus until his conversion on the road to Damascus (Acts 9), which was after Jesus' teaching ministry ended. Paul failed in point one, he was not a disciple of Jesus. He also failed in point two because he wasn't a witness to the resurrected Jesus although he saw a glorified vision of Him in his conversion. But he was personally commissioned by Jesus to preach to the Gentiles. Paul's tells us in his own testimony regarding his conversion in Acts 26:15-18, *'And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'*"

Paul's Apostleship is, however, authenticated by the twelve Apostles in Gal. 2:9, and Paul was called an Apostle in Acts 14:14. Most of Paul's letters started with him asserting his Apostleship and Peter includes Paul's writings with "*the other Scriptures.*" in 2nd Peter 3:15-16, where Peter refers to a collection of Paul's letters calling them "*Scripture.*", a term the early church used to refer to the Old Testament, and here Peter includes the writings of Paul in the same class, giving us a clear indication that Paul's writings are truthful and authoritative. Also, when Peter himself was in error Paul corrected him (Galatians 2:11-14).

Jesus said, "*When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth,*" (John 16:13). The Apostles would, Jesus said, be divinely guided by the Holy Spirit in their teaching and writing. The Apostle John was inspired when he recorded those words of Jesus. Luke was inspired when he wrote the account of Paul being called to be an Apostle. Peter was inspired when he wrote that Paul's writings were Scripture. The point being that Jesus never wrote any of his teachings down, that task was given to the twelve Apostles whose writings have the full authority of Jesus so, if we disregard any of their writings, we disregard the Lord Himself. In Paul's case this meant that he was given the same authority that Jesus had when He was on earth to teach people '*the gospel of God.*' This is the good news that there is salvation through Jesus and that God is the author and source of that salvation which He promised and foretold in the O.T. through the preaching of the prophets (Vs. 2). Paul says that although Jesus was human (descended from David), He was also the Son of God which was verified by His resurrection through the Holy Spirit.

In Vs. 5 Paul talks about the "*obedience of faith,*" which is both the obedience that is the fruit of faith and the obedient submission to the call of God on our lives. When we become Christians our lives are to be submitted to the will of God and the sovereign reign of Jesus as our Lord. Our obedience to the will of God will cause us to bear fruit for the God's kingdom. This calling to be saints in God (Vs.6), is a theme that runs throughout the letter.

#### *Verses 8-15*

In all of his writings Paul gives thanks to God for His grace and this thankfulness was a constant feature of Paul's life. Again we see that the fame of the Roman church had spread throughout the empire. Paul's desire to visit this church is evident in his prayers and it serves to remind us of the rule of God in our lives. Paul was very keen to visit the church in Rome but only made it to Rome as a prisoner. Paul wrote to the church in Rome from Corinth (in Greece), during his third missionary journey (Acts 20:2; Rom.16:23), he expressed a great desire to visit these Christians (Rom.1:10-11; 15:22). But little did he realize exactly how his goal would be fulfilled.

Paul's third missionary campaign ended in Jerusalem, and he, along with other Christians (Acts 20:4), brought alms for the poor (Acts 24:17). Paul was embraced by the church in Jerusalem, but a report had spread that the Apostle was antagonistic to the Jewish system. So, in order to dispel a volatile situation, Paul agreed to submit to a ceremonial "cleansing" in the temple (Acts 21:26). But the Jews were not easily pleased, Paul had been seen in the city with Trophimus, a Gentile from Ephesus, and so the rumour quickly spread that the Apostle had taken "Greeks" into the temple and "*defiled this holy place*" (Acts 21:28), which was a capital offence.

Before long, there was a riot in the city and they seized Paul intending to kill him. Paul's life was only saved when Roman officials intervened and took him to a place of safety. Then, under a heavy guard of 470 soldiers; (Acts 23:23), the Apostle was taken to Caesarea on the coast, where he was confined in Herod's palace. Over a period of time, Paul was subjected to a series of interrogations. Finally, after two years had lapsed, Paul concluded that he would never receive a fair hearing under his present circumstances so, exercising his right as a Roman citizen, he appealed his case to Caesar (Acts 25:11-12). Paul's plans and expectations were rooted in a sense of divine obligation. He had been given the gospel for all Gentiles, not just the Greeks, who considered themselves to be a cultured people and called people 'primitive,' who didn't speak Greek (see Eph.3:1-8).

### *Verses 16-17*

Because of this high view of themselves, the Greeks thought the message of the gospel was weak and in total contrast to the Greek and Roman way of life. These two cultures were used to taking what they wanted and achieving their goals through power and strength. The gospel message of Paul however, was that salvation was completely unmerited and could only be received through the grace of God and faith in Jesus (see 1 Cor. 1:22-25).

It is true that the gospel message and redemption was offered to the Jews first (see John 4:22 & Mark 7:24-30), and in his journeys wherever possible Paul would preach first in the synagogues in the Roman empire. He would explain scripture and how Jesus fulfilled the promises of the O.T. Paul often speaks of the "*righteousness of God*" in this letter to the Roman church. This refers to the righteousness of Jesus that is imputed to the believer. This imputation of righteousness is consistent with God's own righteousness. God is both a just and a righteous judge (see 2:5-16), and based purely on the merit of the obedience and death of His Son, Jesus, and Him alone God justifies the sinner who believes in the Son. We are justified solely on our faith in Jesus and not through anything we have done, are doing, or will do in the future. Justification for both Jew and Gentile, Greek and Barbarian, is received exclusively through faith and not works. Paul's quotation of Habakkuk 2:4, lays a foundation for what follows and points out to us that this principle of justification by faith alone, which was nothing new but was already a O.T. concept. The whole of the believer's life is lived in trust and obedience to God who justifies the sinner.

### *Verses 18-32*

We can sometimes make the mistake that God's judgement is something in the future, for example in the Revelation of Jesus, but God's wrath and divine judgement are dictated by His personal feelings of moral standards and injustice. God's revulsion and opposition to sin is evident in the world now and we can only understand God's mercy and grace if we understand His righteous anger (read Psalm 7:11-13). God's righteous anger and judgement can be revealed in wars, earthquakes, floods and natural disasters. It can be revealed in famines and diseases. But ultimately it is revealed in the hearts of men. People who turn away from God harden their hearts when they enter the spiralling depths of sin and when they deny the truth of God and try to suppress it. Judgement is also seen in God releasing an individual to the lusts and desires of their heart and in their rejection of Jesus and His atoning work on the cross. The order Paul gives here may be significant because moral decay always follows rebellion against God. It isn't that the truth can't be found, Vs. 20 tells us plainly that God's attributes are '*clearly perceived*' but, fallen man refuses to acknowledge God or show Him any honour. What they choose instead is to obstruct and hinder His divine influence on their lives but there is no excuse. No one can plead ignorance, which is the excuse Paul is referring to in Vs. 20, because God has made Himself plainly seen and known by His divine revelation of Himself in nature and creation. Paul goes on to expand on this theme as he talks about the condition of the human heart. Man has seen God clearly but their ungodly way of life serves to push this knowledge deep inside which causes their clear vision of God to become darkened by sin. However, this knowledge of God cannot be fully covered over and this is the point when man refuses to acknowledge God and give Him honour.

Consequently, their hearts and minds grow darker and more foolish as they choose to rely on their own wisdom and knowledge. The worship that belongs to God is now diverted into the pursuits of man and his own achievements. Man was created in God's image with an inbuilt capacity for worshipping and honouring our Creator God. For these reasons God exercises His divine judgement and leaves people to their own vices and perversions. By removing His divine restraint, God leaves them to face the consequences of their sin. Sin causes man's vision of God to become so blurred and distorted that in the end they replace the natural order that God has put in place for a perverted and twisted reality of their own making. Homosexuality replaces heterosexuality and distorted morals become the norm which is in total opposition to God's created order (see Lev. 18:22). Men choose their lusts above the created order, degrading their bodies and their capacity to honour God as they become dominated by their sins.

Yet despite this, God's moral order still stands and man will receive the penalty for the sins they sow (read Gal.6:7-8).

In the closing verses of this chapter Paul gives us a list, (which is by no means extensive), of behaviours that men choose in opposition to God's choice. However, choosing a lifestyle of sin and opposition to God brings with it contempt for God and His choice of created order.

The phrases Paul uses in Vs. 28, "*did not see fit*" and "*debased*" have within them the meaning that they did not "approve" of God's choice for them, therefore, God has committed them to a mindset that He did not "approve." Having this mindset they not only push God to the back of their priorities, they encourage others to do the same and live by their perverted and depraved standards.

### **Conclusion:**

From the very start of the scripture in Genesis chapter one God has established His created order. He chose to put man at the top of that order giving him a natural bias toward worshipping his Creator. By the third chapter of genesis we see sin enter the world and in only three more chapters we see the devastating effect sin has. By the time we reach chapter six God has determined to exterminate all unrighteousness in the flood. Yet even after the flood the war between God's standards and man's sin is fierce. The Hebrew concept for the heart is a metaphor that refers to a person's inner life, their will, thoughts, motivations, and emotions. But this is what God had to say about the heart of men in Jeremiah 17:9-10,

*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? "I the Lord search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds."*

Again we see here the divine judgement of God, He will repay man for his choices in life and men will certainly reap what they sow (Gal. 6:7-8). sin has the most destructive and debilitating effect on man. It causes our God breathed righteousness to be distorted and perverted by the lusts of our heart. But by His grace He has provided a way for man to be restored to his former glory, through Jesus. Because of the redeeming work of Jesus in His life on this earth and His perfect sacrifice on the cross, man has a way back to God. When God tore the curtain separating the holy place from the holy of holies in the temple He also tore down the barriers created by our sin. Now through faith in Jesus and Him alone, we have access to our God and the effects of sin are limited on our lives in this world and will be totally eradicated in the next. God's grace replaces sin and His mercy grants us favour with Him. In this life we are sanctified through the Holy Spirit until we reach our place in heaven when we will be fully restored to the image of God through the grace and love the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.