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## **Who? What? Why?**

*Please read Romans 1:1-17*

**P**aul had never visited the church at Rome, although he had often intended to do so. The church was almost certainly founded by ordinary Christians who happened to find themselves in the same city, and who witnessed to their friends and neighbours. Because his wish to visit them had never been fulfilled, Paul decided to write to them. Instead of explaining the chief features of the gospel in person, he did it by his pen. As a result, the whole Christian church has benefited. We may read for ourselves what those early Christians would have heard Paul say if his desired journey had come about. This makes us tremendously privileged!

When a believer begins to understand Romans, the effect on his spiritual life is remarkable. It becomes clear to him what the biblical gospel really is. He is able to see that much of what passes for the 'gospel' today is not the gospel of God at all.

It becomes clearer to him how scripture relates to scripture, especially how the Old Testament relates to the New. He becomes overwhelmed by what God in Christ has done for sinners. It is not surprising that almost every revival of biblical religion has been associated with a new understanding of Paul's epistle to the Romans.

Let us, then, go straight into the first seventeen verses, and let the letter introduce itself.

### **The writer: who wrote the letter?**

#### *1. It is from a Christian (1:1,5)*

Paul describes himself in verse 1 as 'a bondservant' of Christ, and in verse 5 as one who has 'received grace'. 'I am writing to you,' he says, 'as one who is completely at the disposal of Jesus Christ, as one who has received undeserved kindness, and the life of God in his soul.' Somewhere in Corinth, in A.D. 57, Paul the Christian began to write to his fellow Christians. We were not alive at the time. And yet that letter, perfectly preserved, is open before us. There is no need to make guesses about what the early Christians believed, what gospel they cherished, what message they had which turned the world upside down. We may read it for ourselves!

#### *2. It is from an apostle (1:1,5)*

There are no apostles today. From the men who were witnesses to his resurrection, the risen Lord commissioned some to be his specially appointed teachers and interpreters of spiritual things. They are the foundation of the church, and their authority is unique. They speak with the authority of Christ himself. Their written words are to be received in exactly the same way as we would receive the Saviour's spoken words. This makes Romans

more than an interesting letter from an early Christian. It has apostolic authority. What follows, then, is binding upon us: it is the Word of God.

**3. It is from a zealous missionary (1:1,5,9,14-15)**

In verse 1 Paul explains that he is '*separated to the gospel of God*'. In verse 5 he tells us that he has been commissioned to bring people of all nations into obedience to the faith. In verse 9 he assures us that he serves God with his spirit in the gospel of his Son. Verses 14 and 15 show us that Paul regarded the preaching of the gospel to others as an obligation which he could not shake off. The whole purpose of his existence was the gospel. He was unreservedly committed to it. He had to preach it, just as a man must pay his debts. He considered that he must preach it to every sort of person, and was eager to preach it at Rome also. This is not a letter from a dry old theologian hidden in a dusty library, who is writing without enthusiasm something that he does not feel. It is a letter from a man engaged in missionary labours, from a soldier at the war, from a man who had been through prison, shipwreck, riot, hunger, disease, slander and loss—all for the sake of the message he preached. It is a letter from a man on the job, a man who was all the while proclaiming the good news, a man who could not be held back. The gospel which he preached, and by which the New Testament churches were founded, is the gospel he will outline in his letter.

**4. It is from a man who had the interest of the churches at heart (1:9-13)**

Paul constantly prayed for the Christians at Rome. His particular prayer was that God would open the way for him to go and see them. He longed to benefit them, and to be benefited himself by their fellowship. Although he had never met most of them, his love for them was immense. Most of their faces were unknown

to him, yet he had some sense of fellowship with them. It was the desire to do them good which motivated him to write his letter. We may therefore expect that it will do us good, too.

### **The readers: to whom is the letter addressed?**

In verse 7 Paul pronounces a blessing upon all those to whom he sends his greetings. These are the inhabitants of Rome who have certain characteristics.

#### *1. They are saints (1:6–7)*

The first is that they are beloved of God, and that he has called them to be saints. He is writing to those who are the objects of God's everlasting love. How do you recognize such people when you see them? Paul will tell us more about that in chapter 8. The brief answer is that those whom God has loved eternally, he calls. The gospel had been preached at Rome. People had heard it with their ears. But some had received it in their hearts, had turned from their sins and had freely embraced Jesus Christ as he had been offered to them in the gospel. This is the call of which the New Testament speaks, and which is referred to in verses 6 and 7. Every person who has received such a call is a saint—someone set apart for God, and chosen by him to be a holy person.

#### *2. They have faith (1:8)*

People who have received such a call have faith, as verse 8 makes plain. Faith is taking God at his word. The faith of the Roman Christians was of such a quality that wherever Paul went in the world at that time, he heard people talking about it. It was to those who had such faith that he was now writing. They were those for whom he never ceased to pray (1:9), and with whom he already felt a unique oneness (1:10–12). Most of them were

Gentiles (1:13), although, as we shall see, there were some Jews among them as well.

### *3. They were ordinary men and women*

It is important to note that the readers were the ordinary men and women of the local church at Rome. This letter is not a document intended only for the eyes of seminary students or academics. It is not a treatise for theological experts. It is not a piece of specialized instruction for church officers, or a written lecture for preachers and pastors. It is a letter. And it is to ordinary people. Romans is the gospel believed in the pew of the New Testament churches. It is the gospel which the ordinary believer loved, and lived by. It is the gospel which was believed by the men and women, boys and girls who were saved by God's grace there in Rome. The main reason for the weakness of today's churches is that the gospel which is believed in the pew, and which is proclaimed by ordinary men and women, bears little resemblance to the gospel contained in this epistle to the Romans.

### **The subject: what is the letter about?**

It is about the gospel. This is quite clear from Paul's opening remarks, where he talks about being '*separated to the gospel*' (1:1), and from verses 15-17, where he puts such emphasis upon the fact that he was ready to preach the gospel at Rome also. Why did he want to go to Rome? To preach the gospel! Why was he writing instead? Because it was not possible for him to go to Rome, so he did with his pen what he could not do with his lips. Romans is an explanation and summary of the gospel.

### *1. What is the origin of this gospel?*

It is not a human invention; it is '*the gospel of God*' (1:1). It is not an afterthought by God, but something to which all the

Old Testament Scriptures have been pointing. There is not one message in the Old Testament and another in the New. The gospel is the climax and fulfilment of what God had long promised through his prophets (1:2).

### *2. What is the centre of this gospel?*

It is the Son of God, *'Jesus Christ our Lord'* (1:3). The gospel is a person. He is a man, and he is God. You can trace back his human ancestry, and can see that he is a direct descendant of David. He walked on the earth almost unknown. Only a few were able to see the true identity of Jesus of Nazareth, and then only because of the Spirit's enlightenment. His real identity was powerfully declared when he was raised from the dead. Since the Holy Spirit's outpouring after his ascension, the number of people who can see his identity has vastly increased. So he was *'declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead'* (1:4). This divine person is the centre and focus of the gospel of God.

### *3. What is the content of this gospel?*

It is not simply a declaration of who Jesus Christ is; it is also a declaration of what he has done. Verses 16–17 show to us that the key word in gospel preaching is *'righteousness'*. In the gospel of Jesus Christ it is made clear how men and women may be put right with God. For God himself is holy and righteous. Men are sinful and depraved. How can people like that be put in a right relationship with such a God? The gospel tells us. It is in the gospel that the righteousness of God is revealed. It is not a righteousness which you can earn. It is a righteousness which is revealed from faith to faith. The gospel begins with faith and ends with faith. It is all about how men and women may get right with God by means of faith. By faith in whom? In Jesus Christ, God and man. It is the person who is righteous by faith

who will be saved, as even Habakkuk in the Old Testament had taught.

#### *4. What is the power of this gospel?*

Its power lies in the fact that it is the means that God uses to save people. Whom does he save? *'Everyone who believes'*, Jew or Gentile (1:16). It is the power of God to *everyone* who believes. By the preaching of this message God actually brings men and women into a right relationship with himself. It is not everyone who *hears* who is saved, but everyone who *believes*. This certainly applies to the Jew first, but it also holds good for the Gentiles.

This is how the apostle Paul introduces his summary and explanation of the gospel. It is a terrible thing to be ignorant of the only saving message which God has revealed. It is not necessary for us to be ignorant or confused any longer. We have the key in our hands, and have begun to put it into the lock. The door is beginning to open a little. With very little effort we can really begin to enter into what Paul has to say.