

The Greatest Letter Ever Written

An Expository Study of the Epistle of Romans

Introduction

The word, *Epistle*, means: *a letter from an Apostle*. This Book is a letter from Paul, the Apostle- to the Church that was in Rome during the middle part of the first Century. It is one of 21 Epistles in the New Testament- 13 of them by Paul. To say that Paul had influence on the New Testament is like saying that water has an influence on fish. God used Paul in the New Testament like no other single man- except Jesus Christ. What God gave him- *especially* in this Book and in the **Epistle to the Galatians** literally formed the very Foundation for Christianity itself.

I have approached this Study with fear and trembling because we need to understand how the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write down these “God- breathed” Words directly from the Mouth of God to you and me. This Study will change your Life.

The Greatest Letter Ever Written

Most historians are unanimous in saying that the *Gettysburg Address* is the greatest Speech ever given by an American President. Likewise, most Biblical scholars are also unanimous when they call **Romans**- “*The greatest Letter ever written*”. Not only is this Book a masterpiece of Literature- but this Book alone brings forth approximately 65% of all Christian Theology and Doctrine- *especially* those Divine Truths concerning how sinful Man is made Righteous in God’s Sight (Justification).

When Pastors, Expositors, and Bible Teachers throughout the 2,000 year history of the Church have been asked what Book of the Bible they would choose to have if they could only have one Book for the remainder of their Lives. The consensus has been overwhelming in their Answer ... **the Epistle to the Romans**.

Some Fast Facts

Of the thirteen Epistles written by Paul, the **Epistle to the Romans** includes the second longest Introduction. This Introduction extends from verse 1 through to verse 17. And it is only exceeded by the first two Chapters of **Galatians** that comprise Paul's introduction of *that* letter. **Galatians** however needed a longer Introduction because it was Paul's *first* Epistle; and it dealt with a serious Heresy that had infiltrated the **Galatian** Churches, specifically- the Heresy of “Legalism.”

Here, the **Epistle to the Romans** does not deal with a specific Heresy. But Paul had never been to Rome at the time of its writing. So, he includes a longer Introduction to explain who he is, not so much by his Credentials (as in **Galatians**), but by who he is and why he is writing this Book.

If we were to take a broad overview of **Romans** we would see two major themes separated by a large parenthesis regarding Israel.

Romans chapters 1-8 Our Relationship to God

Romans chapters 9-11 Paul's Desire for Israel to be save

Romans chapters 12-16 Our Relationship to each other

... and if we look at this Epistle *chronologically*, as it fits into sequence with the other letters of Paul- we can see a Pattern:

- **Galatians:** Written in 48 AD., it puts forth a strong stand for Grace. Its Message is twofold- Christianity is *not* simply a “Branch” of Judaism, but is the *fullness* of God’s Plan for Mankind- therefore, Legalism has no part in the Christian Way of Life.
- **I and II Thessalonians:** Written in 52 AD., it addresses the individual Relationship of Believers to each other and the believer's Anticipation of the eminent Return of Jesus Christ
- **I and II Corinthians:** Written in 56 AD., these Books deal with the cooperative Responsibilities of Believers in the local Church. These are the Epistles on “*Ecclesiology*”- the Study of the “*ekkleesia*” the Church.
- And then **Romans:** Written in 57 AD., written from Corinth to a Church Paul had never visited.

This Letter (Epistle) is somewhat impersonal but objective. It deals with the Doctrines by which we function as Christians, such as:

- Justification by Grace alone through Faith alone in Christ alone
- Living by Grace and the Power of the Spirit
- Serving the Lord with one another

In **Ecclesiastes** we note that Solomon's major Theme was that we, as believers, *enjoy* Life as we obey God's Word. And these are *not* antithetical Concepts. The *Reason* we can enjoy Life is because Christ has set us free from the “*Law of Sin and Death*”; and has brought to us the “*Law of the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus*”. We are joyful *because* Christ’s Law of Love that indwells within us transcends the oppressive Laws of Man. And that Truth, which is explained in **practical** Terms in **Galatians**, is now explained in **theological** Terms in **Romans**.

The **Epistle to the Romans** is without a doubt the “Crown Jewel” of all the Epistles.

This Epistle, that we are going to study, has changed the course of Christian history more than once. For example- during the Reformation (16th Century) this Epistle was the one Bible Book that Martin Luther used to defend his Position against the Roman Church that we are saved by Grace alone; that we live by Faith alone; and that we live according to the Scriptures alone. Those Scriptural Truths that Luther found in the **Epistle to the Romans** by themselves ignited the Fire that began the Protestant Reformation. It is those same Scriptural Truths that today the Roman Church refuses to acknowledge to their everlasting Shame.

Of this Epistle Luther said:

"It is the true masterpiece of the New Testament, and the very purest Gospel, which is well worthy and deserving that a Christian man should not only learn it by heart, word for word, but also that he should daily deal with it as daily bread for man's soul. It can never be too much or well read or studied. The more it is handled the more precious it becomes and the better it tastes."¹

One of the greatest French expositors of the Bible, Frederic Godet observed:

"The Protestant Reformation was undoubtedly the work of the **Epistle to the Romans** as well as that of **Galatians**. Spiritual revival in the church will be connected to a deeper understand of this book."²

The great Bible scholar, Harry Ironsides said of **Romans**:

"The Epistle to the **Romans** is the most scientific statement of the Divine Plan for the redemption of mankind. It is the orderly setting forth of the Gospel that the mind of man craves, the declaration of man's Need along with the gracious plan of God's salvation which culminates in His glorification."³

This Epistle is credited with being the Catalyst for the Conversion of Augustine- probably the greatest Theologian the world has ever seen. The Presbyterian Pastor, James Montgomery Boice wrote:

"Augustine was living in sin with a woman with whom he had fathered a child. He was unemployed and given to much drink and riotous living. One day, while in the garden of a friend's estate near Milan, Italy, Augustine heard a child singing the words, "*tole, lege, tole, lege*" (take and read; take and read). He had never heard a song with words like that before, so he received it as a message from God. Obeying that message- he rushed to where a copy of the Bible was lying, opened it at random, and began to read the words that first met his astonished gaze. They were from **Romans 13:13&14**:

13 Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy.

14 But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.

These words were the Means of Augustine's Conversion. Afterward, he wrote,

"Instantly, as the sentence ended- by a light, as it were, or security infused my heart- all gloom of doubt was vanished away"⁴

¹ Martin Luther, *Exposition of Romans*

² Frederic Godet, *A Journey Through Romans*

³ H. Ironsides, *An Expositor's Commentary of Romans*

⁴ JM Boice, *Romans, an Expositional Commentary, Vol. 1* (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 1991) page 10

It has been said many times by many people that **Romans** is not an Epistle about the Gospel- **The Epistle of Romans is** the Gospel. And to be ignorant of **Romans** is to be ignorant of Christianity itself.

May God bless us all as we study the **Epistle to the Romans**.

Introduction to the Apostle Paul

The Apostle Paul is perhaps the most important figure in all of Christianity- with the exception of Jesus Christ Himself. Paul was one of the most famous citizens of the Roman

Empire and without question one of the most influential individuals in all of human History. He was used by the Lord in his missionary and evangelistic Activities to set in motion a great deal of the Organization known today as the “Christian Church”- the Body of Christ on earth, to the extent that billions of human beings have been directly or indirectly affected by his Ministry. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul wrote the foundational Documents for the Christian “Way of Life”, the Word of God which has changed the lives of millions.

Paul's Education

Paul was educated by his mother until the age of five. From age five to ten he studied with his father in the Hebrew Scriptures and traditional Writings. At the same time, being a Roman citizen and living in a Greek and Roman environment, he received a thorough education in the Greek Language, History, and Culture.

He was sent to Jerusalem at about the age of ten to attend the rabbinical school of Gamaliel, who was the son of Simeon the son of Hillel. Gamaliel was a most eminent rabbi of that time- who was mentioned both in the Talmud and in the New Testament (**The Acts 5:24-40; 22:3**). Gamaliel was called, “*Rabban Gamaliel*”⁵ - one of only seven Teachers so called. He was a Pharisee, but he rose above the petty Prejudice that dominated the Pharisees in the 1st Century. During his life, Gamaliel composed a Prayer *against* the “Christian heretics” of his day. Gamaliel considered Christianity to be an abhorrent Evil that would soon pass away. He lived and died a Jew.

At this time, Herod was dead, and the Romans had complete control of Judea, hence, there was Roman money, language, and culture. The Jews, therefore, were inclined to cling more closely to their Religion as the center of Unity.

During this time, there were two great rabbinical Schools- one of Hillel and the other of Schammai. Hillel, the grandfather of Gamaliel, held that Jewish Tradition was superior to the Law (Torah). The School of Schammai despised Traditionalists, especially when their Teachings clashed with the writings of Moses.

The religious school of Gamaliel (Hillel) was chiefly oral and usually had a prejudice against any Book but Scripture. They used a system of scriptural Exegesis, and the Jewish historian, Josephus in his writings expressed the wish to have such a power of Exegesis. When School was in session, learned men met and discussed the Scriptures, gave various interpretations to them, suggested illustrations, and quoted precedents. The students were encouraged to question, doubt, and even contradict. This was the setting which educated one of the most brilliant men who ever lived- Paul.

When Paul became a Christian, his very thorough Education was enormously helpful. He was able to assimilate Christian Doctrines rapidly and relate them accurately to the Scripture Teaching he had received. From his Education, both from Gamaliel and in the desert from the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul developed a Divine viewpoint and an Attitude toward human History.

Paul knew that the existence of God can easily be perceived by anyone; that Man can become aware of God- but that many men's deliberate Sin halted this good Beginning by immoral Activities which accompanied their Idolatry. Therefore, Paul had an intense hatred of Idolatry of any kind.

Paul's Teaching shows that the only true and genuine Reality in the Universe- is God. Idolatry distorts Man's Conception of the World and external Nature. Thus, Idolatry- of any kind and in any form- is the Enemy of all Mankind.

⁵ *Rabban* meant, “*Teacher*”.

Paul knew the Law of Growth of Human Nature. As a Roman, Tarsian, Hebrew, and culturally Greek, he knew of the many distortions of the Life of his Society. As a nation becomes unhealthy, Development is halted. Society's Errors as to the Nature of God and the true Relation of God to Man prevented Nations from getting rid of their besetting Evil.

Paul, the Prisoner for the Gentiles

It is nothing short of fascinating to see that the Lord made Paul a "Missionary to the Gentiles", even though he was the most "Jewish" of all the Apostles.

After a considerable stay at Antioch, after his second missionary Journey, Paul departed and went over all the country of Galatia and Phrygia in order to strengthen the Disciples (**The Acts 18:23**). During this time, he also gave Directions for the Collection for the Poor in Jerusalem.

He came to Ephesus, probably in about 53 A.D. He found there twelve disciples of Apollos- who had only received John's Baptism and were not aware of the Holy Spirit and Church Age Mysteries.

He taught three months in the Synagogue in Ephesus. In the face of opposition, he took his classes to the School of one, Tyrannus, where he taught daily for two years. Exorcists were converted and books of Magic were burned by the new converts. He paid a visit to Corinth, then returned to Ephesus where he wrote **1 Corinthians**.

Paul left for Troas and Macedonia because of the danger in Ephesus from the silversmiths and craftsmen who made articles for the Worship of the pagan goddess, Diana. He sailed to Macedonia to meet Titus, landed at Neapolis and went to Philippi where he was "**comforted by Titus.**" He sent Titus to Corinth with the writings that made up **II Corinthians** and instructions for completing the collection there for needy Christians.

Paul traveled through Macedonia and finally arrived at Corinth himself, staying there about three months and writing the **Epistle to the Romans**. He took ship for Miletus where he met for a few days with Ephesian Elders. He then sailed (island hopping to Coos, Rhodes, and Patara) to Tyre. From Tyre, he sailed to Ptolemais and reached Caesarea.

Although he wanted to go- Paul was warned *not* to visit Jerusalem. He went anyway and was warmly received by the brethren. He had an interview with James and the Elders. A Charge was brought against him by the Sanhedrin that "**he taught all the Jews among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their sons, neither to walk after their customs.**"

The Sanhedrin asked Paul to do a public Act of the Law in order to prove his Faith. There were four men who were to undergo the Ritual associated with the Nazarite vow, and Paul was requested to put himself under that Vow and to pay the Costs of the other four men. He did so.

After this, some Jews from Asia stirred up the people against him, charging him with bringing Greeks into the Temple. A Gentile man from Ephesus named, Trophimus was with Paul, and the Jews supposed that Paul had brought him into the Temple, which would have been a Sacrilege. The mob took Paul to kill him, but soldiers of the Roman garrison appeared. Paul spoke to the mob in his own defense, telling of his mission to the Gentiles. They shouted, "**Away with such a fellow from the earth, for it is not fit that he should live.**" (**The Acts 22:1-23**).

1 "Brethren and fathers, hear my defense which I now offer to you."

2 And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew dialect, they became even more quiet; and he said,

3 "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today.

4 I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons,

5 as also the high priest and all the Council of the elders can testify. From them I also received letters to the brethren, and started off for Damascus in order to bring even those who were there to Jerusalem as prisoners to be punished.

6 "But it happened that as I was on my way, approaching Damascus about noontime, a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me,

7 and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?'

8 And I answered, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said to me, 'I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting.'

9 And those who were with me saw the light, to be sure, but did not understand the voice of the One who was speaking to me.

10 And I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Get up and go on into Damascus, and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do.'

11 But since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me and came into Damascus.

12 "A certain Ananias, a man who was devout by the standard of the Law, and well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there,

13 came to me, and standing near said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very time I looked up at him.

14 And he said, 'The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will and to see the Righteous One and to hear an utterance from His mouth.

15 For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard.

16 Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.'

17 "It happened when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I fell into a trance,

18 and I saw Him saying to me, 'Make haste, and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about Me.'

19 And I said, 'Lord, they themselves understand that in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed in You.

20 And when the blood of Your witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the coats of those who were slaying him.'

21 And He said to me, 'Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles. "'

22 They listened to him up to this statement, and then they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live!"

23 And as they were crying out and throwing off their cloaks and tossing dust into the air,

The Roman soldiers took Paul to the governor's castle for interrogation by scourging, at which time Paul claimed his Roman citizenship. The next morning he was taken before the Sanhedrin, but there was no conclusion because of the dissension between the Sadducees and Pharisees. Paul was taken back to the castle for protection, and it was that night that the Lord appeared to Paul telling him to **"be of good cheer."** (The Acts 23:6- 10)

6 But perceiving that one group were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, Paul began crying out in the Council, "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!"

7 As he said this, there occurred a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the assembly was divided.

8 For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.

9 And there occurred a great uproar; and some of the scribes of the Pharisaic party stood up and began to argue heatedly, saying, "We find nothing wrong with this man; suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?"

10 And as a great dissension was developing, the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them and ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force, and bring him into the barracks.

There arose a conspiracy among forty Jews to assassinate Paul, but Paul's nephew brought him a warning of the plot. The Romans decided to send him to Caesarea to Felix, the procurator (governor) of Judea (**The Acts 22:21**). Before Felix, Paul was merely asked from province he had come. Five days later, the high priest Ananias and some of the Sanhedrin appeared, with Tertullus as their advocate (**The Acts 24:1- 9**).

1 After five days the high priest Ananias came down with some elders, with an attorney named Tertullus, and they brought charges to the governor against Paul.

2 After Paul had been summoned, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying to the governor, "Since we have through you attained much peace, and since by your providence reforms are being carried out for this nation,

3 we acknowledge this in every way and everywhere, most excellent Felix, with all thankfulness.

4 But, that I may not weary you any further, I beg you to grant us, by your kindness, a brief hearing.

5 For we have found this man a real pest and a fellow who stirs up dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.

6 And he even tried to desecrate the temple; and then we arrested him. [We wanted to judge him according to our own Law.

7 But Lysias the commander came along, and with much violence took him out of our hands,

8 ordering his accusers to come before you.] By examining him yourself concerning all these matters you will be able to ascertain the things of which we accuse him."

9 The Jews also joined in the attack, asserting that these things were so.

They made charges, which Paul denied. Felix delayed the proceeding further until Claudias Lysias, the captain of the Roman troops in Jerusalem, could come to give evidence.

After a few days, Felix' wife, Drusilla, a Jewess, wanted to see and hear Paul. Paul appeared and gave the gospel to Felix and Drusilla. Felix trembled but was unrepentant. He wanted a bribe from Paul so did not acquit him. (Drusilla died in the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, AD 79.)

Felix kept Paul a prisoner in Caesarea (under loose house arrest) for two years until the arrival of Festus, the new governor. Festus wanted Paul taken back to Jerusalem, but Paul was

aware of the danger there and uttered the Latin word *Caesarem apello!* -- "I appeal to Caesar!" Festus was thus obliged to make arrangements for Paul to travel to Rome under escort.

About this time, King Agrippa II, with his sister, Berenice, came to visit Festus, the new governor. Festus pleaded ignorance of Jewish law, so Paul made his testimony before Agrippa, with the greatest of pomp and ceremony. This episode was one of the greatest defenses of the gospel ever recorded. Agrippa said, "**Almost you persuade me ...**"

Festus decided then that Paul was innocent or wrongdoing, and he would have let him go free if he had not appealed to Caesar.

Paul's Final Voyage to Rome

Paul's escort on the trip to Rome was a platoon of Roman soldiers under Julius, a centurion of the Augustan Cohort. They sailed in a coasting vessel to Adramyttium and Sidon. Paul was given liberty. The next port was Myra, from which they took ship to Italy.

They sailed to Crete, stayed at the port of Fair Havens for one month, sailed for Phoenix, and were driven on the rocks at Malta where they stayed for three months. From Malta they sailed in the vessel "Castor and Pollux" to Syracuse (Sicily) and Rhegium, the port city of the Italian province of Puteoli. From there they went to Rome on the Appian Way.

In Rome Paul dwelled in his own hired house under the supervision of a Prefect of the Praetorian Guard. He was permitted to hold meetings, and he met with Jewish elders, winning some of them to Christ. This period lasted two years, during which he wrote Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians, and Philipians.

He was acquitted by Nero, so he was free to travel and did so. His visits were to Crete and to Asia Minor; and it is widely thought that he traveled in Spain on a missionary journey. He is thought to have been arrested again in Ephesus and taken again to Rome from there, but this time treated as a malefactor, with his friends deserting him (except for Luke and Onesiphorus). There was persecution in Rome at this time, and a campaign of terror by Nero against the Christians. Paul was condemned and executed in Rome- by being beheaded.

2Timothy 4:7&8

**7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith;
8 in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.**

Roman Names

During the Roman Republic (*Senatus Populusque Romanus - SPQR*) a Roman citizen's name was made up of four parts,

1. Praenomen
2. Nomen
3. Cognomen
4. Honorific

The **Praenomen** was the person's given name.

The **Nomen** was the tribal name, hence, Julius Caesar's real first name was Gaius, and he was of the Julian tribe.

The **Cognomen** was the family name. Nero's family name was Ahenobarbus ("red beard," or "bronze beard"). He was Lucius, of the Domitian tribe, of the family Ahenobarbus. His **Honorific**, "Nero", meant "*hero*" in the Sabine language.

Examples of Roman Emperor's Names:

- Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus Nero (Nero)
- Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus (Scipio)
- Gaius Julius Caesar Imperator (Julius Caesar)
- Gaius Caesar Augustus (Caligula)

Julius Caesar's fame was so great that his family name became a tribal name. In other words, his family became a recognized Roman Tribe. One of the later members of his family was "*Gaius Caesar Augustus Germanicus*", whose Legions pushed the boundaries of the Roman Empire to the Rhine River in eastern Europe. Germanicus' wife was, "*Aggripina*", for whom the city of Cologne, Germany, was named (in Latin, "*Colonia Aggripina*").

Germanicus' son was also "*Gaius Caesar Augustus*". As a boy, he was with his parents encamped with the Legions in Germany. His father dressed him in a centurion's Uniform with breastplate, shield, sword, and boots. The soldiers called him "*Little Boots*", or in Latin, "*Caligula*".

Paul's Roman Name

The Apostle Paul's given name was, "Saul". His tribal name was the Jewish tribe of, "*Benjamin*". His family name was taken from his birthplace, "*Tarsus*"⁶. So, when he had to use his full name as a Roman citizen, it would be, "*Saulus Benjaminus Tarsus*".

Some people had Honorifics, or Titles, added to their names as an honor for something they had done. For example, Scipio won battles in Africa, so he was called, "*Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus*". His nephew was "*Scipio Asiaticus*".

Julius Caesar was the winner of the highest military Honor of the Roman Empire during the Republic, that of "*Imperator*". And so, the person so honored was called, "*Imperator*". This is the origin of the word "*Emperor*". Thus, he was, "*Gaius Julius Caesar Imperator*".

Saul's honorific was "*Paul*" [small], given to him by a Roman official. So, Paul's full Roman name was, "*Saulus Benjaminus Tarsus Paulus*".

⁶ Tarsus has been a city for about 6,000 years. It is located in south-central Turkey- 20km inland from the Mediterranean

