

Romans study week 1 - Introduction

The book of Romans is a letter to a church, or more likely small churches scattered across Rome. Paul had not founded this church; but if you look at the end of the letter he sends greetings to many individuals there. Note particularly Phoebe 16:1 who is described as a deacon and patron or benefactor. She was probably a single woman or widow of substantial means who took a leading part in the church at Cenchreae. It was Phoebe who took Paul's letter to the church at Rome and probably read it to them and answered any questions they might have had about its contents.

This letter has been hugely influential in Christian history: Augustine, Martin Luther and John Wesley were all converted, dramatically changed by linking its words with their experience. Today we often find it difficult as we read it with all the history on top, the shifts in language, the problems of translation and our very different socio-economic situation. Nevertheless it is still a letter which can speak powerfully to us.

The single most important theme of Romans is the unity of Jew and Gentile. Apart from the introduction 1:1- 15 and conclusion 15:22 – 16:27 the letter concerns the unification of the 3 great divisions in Paul's world:

1. Gentiles and Jews 1:16 – 8:39
2. Jews and Christians Romans 9:1 - 11:36
3. Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles Romans 12:1 – 15:21

'Paul gradually narrows down his focus. The subject of Romans is God's passionate desire to heal a broken world, to end the normalcy of injustice founded on violence and to bring about a unified and peaceful earth.'¹

Read chapter 1:8 – 15

How does Paul endear himself to them?

How might this letter pull them together – how is there a theme of unity here?

¹ Borg The First Paul, page 158

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What would Paul think was wrong with the Roman civilisation?

What might he think was wrong with ours?

How are we more together than we were in the past?

What are our divisions?

Paul argues that both Jews and Gentiles have sinned and fall short of God's glory, (Romans 3:23). In effect all are in the wrong. The Jews do not fully keep the law God has given them and the Gentiles (non-Jews) do not keep the inner law (Romans 2:15), God has inbuilt his law, written it on our hearts. Most of the first 3 chapters state the problem of the human condition.