

Ministry of Grace Church

Romans 1:1-4 - Speaker Notes



Background – The Book of Romans

Who wrote this letter?

Through the centuries since the time of its writing, there has been little dispute that Romans was written by the Apostle Paul. Though there have been some who claimed he was not the writer, very few people take these claims seriously. As far back as the late first century, Clement of Rome (who is mentioned in [Philippians 4:3](#)) quoted from this letter, giving credit to Paul as its author.

When was this letter written?

Concerning the time of writing of this letter there is also reasonable certainty. Based on the following, we know that Paul had never been to Rome before writing this letter.

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that often I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented so far) ... ([Romans 1:13](#))

We also learn that he was about to take a trip to Jerusalem with a gift from the churches in Achaia and Macedonia. After delivering this gift he was planning on going to Spain and stopping by Rome on the way.

For this reason I have often been prevented from coming to you; but now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you whenever I go to Spain ... But now I am going to Jerusalem to serve the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to share with the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. ([Romans 15:22-26](#))

Also, from Acts 20, we find that this trip to Jerusalem occurred between Passover and Pentecost. So, the writing of this letter occurred in the spring, just before Paul's trip to Jerusalem, most likely between AD 56 and AD 58.

Where was Paul when he wrote this letter?

In [Acts 20: 4](#) we know that four of the people who were about to accompany Paul on his trip were Timothy, Sosipater, Gaius, and Erastus, and they were all with him at the time of the writing of this letter (see [Romans 16:21, 23](#)). In [1 Corinthians 1:14](#) and other sources we can learn that all four of these men were residents of Corinth (either temporary or long-term). Also, in [Romans 16:1](#) we are introduced to Phoebe, generally believed to be the person who delivered this letter to the Romans.

She was a deaconess of the church in Cenchrea, the eastern port city of Corinth. From all these facts, it is reasonable to assume that Paul was in Corinth when he wrote this letter.

Why did Paul write this letter?

Paul had a message (the Gospel message) which he had been called to deliver to the entire world and was determined to include the capital city of Rome in his ministry. It was important that he go to Rome because it was the center of the world. As to who started this church in Rome, we don't know for sure. But it is possible that it was some of the "visitors from Rome" who were in Jerusalem and heard the gospel preached on the day of Pentecost (see [Acts 2:10](#)).

Paul's ambition was to preach where no one else had been ([Romans 15:20](#)), and he had no hesitation in going on to Rome to do so. As we just read, in [Romans 1:13](#), Paul had often made plans to go to Rome but thus far he had been prevented from going there. He currently had plans to go to Jerusalem, and after taking the gifts from the churches in Achaia and Macedonia there, he planned to go to Rome and then on to Spain ([Romans 15:24](#), [Romans 15:28](#)). Meanwhile, he sent this letter so that the Christians in Rome might know the full truth about his gospel ([Romans 1:15](#); [Romans 2:16](#)).

This appears to be the only letter written by Paul to a church (or group of churches) that Paul has not previously been to. In the first half of this letter, he deals with righteousness. First of all, the righteousness of God and then the righteousness that God demands from all of us. He points out that none of us are righteous in and of ourselves, which is why the death of the righteous Son of God is so important to us. He explains that we can only obtain this righteousness by God's grace, through faith in Christ and His atoning death.

Now, before we get into the contents of this letter, it will be helpful to understand the cultural and historical background in which Paul wrote to the Romans.

Cultural and Historical Background of Romans

Paul frequently uses the expression "Jews and Greeks" in his writings, even in this letter to the Christians in Rome. We generally think of Jews as being people from Israel (the land promised by God to Abraham.) Likewise, we think of a Greek as one who is from Greece. However, that becomes problematic because of history.

What do I mean? We know from reading the Old Testament and the writings of various historians throughout the ages that in 722 BC, the 10 northern tribes of Israel were conquered by the Assyrian army and many of them were scattered throughout the known world of that time. We also know that the two southern tribes were conquered by Babylon in 586 BC and many of them were scattered throughout the known world of that time. Then, in AD 70, the Romans conquered the entire land of Israel and razed Jerusalem to the ground, murdering most of the Jews living there. They erased the name Israel from their maps and instead used the name "Palestine," as an intentional affront to Jews whose mortal enemies had been the Philistines.

Around 333 BC Alexander the Great led the Greek army in the defeat of the Persians, one of the most powerful armies in the world at the time. Alexander went on to conquer the remainder of the known world. As a result, he spread the Greek language and culture, along with many of the Greek people, throughout the lands he conquered. The common Greek language, called Koine Greek, became the de facto language throughout the world. Even after Rome defeated the Greeks in 146 BC, the common language of the world was Greek. By the time that Paul wrote this letter to Rome,

Jews and Greeks were living side-by-side throughout the Roman Empire, even in the capital city of Rome itself.

There are three factors necessary for an entire group of people to retain their cultural identity when separated from their homeland

1. A belief in a shared history
2. A common culture (including language and religious beliefs)
3. Some form of physical identity (bodily appearance, hairstyle, clothing, etc.)

For a Jew these 3 factors are easily identifiable. A Jew would, 1) identify with Israel's history; 2) believe in the one true God (keeping the Law by observing the Sabbath, etc.) and; 3) the practice of circumcision. At the same time, a Greek came to mean more than just someone who was from Greece. It meant someone who had also adopted Greek culture, including religious ideas, and who spoke the Greek language.

At the time of the writing of this letter, the Jews viewed the people of the world in two categories, Jews and Gentiles. The Greeks, on the other hand, viewed the people of the world as Greeks and Barbarians. This two-fold way of viewing the world by both Jews and Greeks reveals a deep-seated pride on the part of both groups. Among the Jews, "Phariseism" is synonymous with legalism and pride. But the Greeks could be just as arrogant concerning their culture and way of life. In other words, when it comes to pride and arrogance, there was plenty of blame to spread around in the first century whether one is talking about Jews or Greeks.

Because the Jews refused to accept the religious practices of Rome, their emperors twice expelled the Jews from the city (once in AD 19 by Tiberius, and again in AD 49 by Claudius). These examples demonstrate the uneasy tension that existed between Jews and Greeks in the Roman world. In fact, during the period between 50 BC and AD 120, there was recurring violent ethnic conflict between Jews and Greeks (Romans).

To a non-believer it would be inconceivable to think that in the midst of this ethnic tension, hatred, and violence, a group of Jewish believers would be commissioned to take the gospel to the Greeks (and the rest of the Gentiles). In fact, Paul, a former Pharisee, residing in the city of Antioch, which only a few years earlier had been at the center of one of these ethnic uprisings, was called by the Holy Spirit to a mission to the Gentiles. That a former Pharisee would become an "apostle to the Gentiles" and would suffer greatly to see Greeks and others won for the kingdom of God, is a testament to God's transforming power.

The violence between Jews and Greeks also sheds light on the narrative accounts of Acts. In every city to which Paul traveled he began in the synagogue. As a result of his preaching, some Jews believed and some Greeks believed, and this volatile combination created civic unrest for the remainder of the population. In Iconium some Jews and Greeks believed, which caused unbelieving Jews to stir up a mob of Gentiles to persecute the fledgling church ([Acts 14:1-5](#)). This same scenario was repeated in cities throughout the Roman empire. In Philippi, Paul and Silas were dragged to the marketplace before the city authorities. The accusation brought against them was, "These men, being Jews, exceedingly trouble our city" ([Acts 16:19-20](#)). In Thessalonica when a "great multitude of devout Greeks" were converted, the unbelieving Jews become envious and stirred up a mob ([Acts 17:4-5](#)). In Corinth another mob was stirred up against the disciples, but when the proconsul Gallio refused to judge the case, we are told, "... they all took hold of Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, and began beating him in front of the judgment seat." ([Acts 18:17](#)).

When one becomes aware of the violence between Jews and Greeks, the accounts recorded by Luke in the Book of Acts take on a sober realism. This mutual hostility between Jews and Greeks would have been an inherent part of the makeup of the people to whom Paul wrote this letter.

Romans 1:1

Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, having been set apart for the gospel of God, Paul starts off his letter in the manner which was customary for a teacher or person of authority, that is, by identifying who it is from. Usually within the opening phrase, the writer and the intended audience were both identified. Paul deviates from this, however, by giving an explanation on why he is the appropriate person to be sending this doctrinal letter. It is not until verse seven that he identifies who this letter was written to.

You will notice that he used his Greek name (Paul) rather than his Hebrew name (Saul). This is either because he wanted to show that was is a completely new creation as a result of his conversion to Christianity (see **2 Corinthians 5:17**), or because he was the recognized apostle to the Gentiles, and he was writing to Christians in the Gentile world of Rome.

Paul refers to himself as a slave, like other New Testament writers (James, Peter, and Jude). Let's stop for a second and consider the fact that even the great Apostle Paul made a specific point of the fact that he is not the master but the servant. For us, our sin nature, that is the lustful "pride of life" stimulated so strongly by worldly advertisements, is constantly trying to make us the master, not the slave.

Romans 1:2

which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures,

Paul says that it was promised beforehand. But what is he referring to? He's referring to "the gospel of God" which he mentioned in the previous verse. The word translated "gospel" is *euangelion*, which is from *eu*, meaning "good" and a form of *angellō*, which means "to proclaim a message." Therefore, the word translated "gospel" really means "good news" or "a good message." But what, specifically, is the good news? Paul states it very clearly in **1 Corinthians 15:1-5**:

And, brothers, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you have received, and in which you stand; ... that Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures; and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the Twelve.

There are two key elements to this "good news." The first is that Jesus Christ died for our sins. Though He is completely God, He also became completely man and lived a sinless life. Since He didn't commit any sins, He didn't need to die to pay for His sins. As a result, He could die a substitutionary death to pay for the sins of others. The proof, according to Paul, is the fact that He was buried.

The second key element of the gospel is that He rose again. Only God can give life, and only God can raise someone from the dead. The resurrection is the power behind the death. It is, in effect, the verification that His life was sinless and, therefore, His life could pay for the sins of others. The proof, according to Paul, is the fact that He was seen by Cephas (Peter) and by the other disciples.

Paul tells us that God promised this good news beforehand through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures. Here are a few examples of the promise of the good news:

Come now, and let us reason together,” Says Yahweh, “Though your sins are as scarlet, They will be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They will be like wool. (Isaiah 1:18) Yahweh your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers; you shall listen to him. (Deuteronomy 18:15)

But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our peace fell upon Him, And by His wounds we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But Yahweh has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him. (Isaiah 53:5-6)

Behold, as for the proud one, His soul is not right within him; But the righteous will live by his faith. (Habakkuk 2:4)

Paul is about to present the doctrine of salvation through faith alone, which was clearly taught in the Old Testament. He will present in this letter that every human being who has ever been born is a sinner and is deserving of death. But he will also point out that Jesus lived a perfect life and offered up that life as payment of the sins of all mankind.

Romans 1:3

concerning His Son, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh,

Paul has just talked about the good news that God promised through His prophets. But even more important than who proclaimed this message in the past is who this good news is about. In this verse, He tells us who this gospel is about, “His (God’s) Son,” Jesus Christ. The importance of this verse cannot be overlooked. Paul is making it very clear from the start of this epistle who the central figure of the Gospel is.

He now goes on to declare the pedigree of the one he is talking about. Paul says that Jesus “was born of the seed of David;” that is, Jesus Christ took on human flesh as a descendent of King David. And why is it important for Paul to establish that Jesus was a direct descendent of King David? Because the Jews have been waiting for the One who was to come and rule eternally. This One was predicted numerous times in the Old Testament, most notably in David’s instruction to his son Solomon shortly before David’s death which is recorded in 1 Kings 2:1-4. In order for Jesus to be declared the Christ, the Messiah of the Old Testament, He had to be a descendent of King David.

Next, he says that the Son was a descendant of David “according to the flesh.” This is an interesting expression in that it is used of no one in the Bible except Jesus. But why is this never used to describe anyone else? Saying that he came into being with respect to flesh and blood implies that there is another aspect (another nature) of His being that is not flesh and blood which had already existed. There is only one person who existed before He became flesh and blood and that is Jesus, who is eternally God. He has always had His divine nature, and He took upon himself a human nature.

Romans 1:4

who was designated as the Son of God in power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord,

Having just proven the humanity of Jesus, Paul now demonstrates the deity of Jesus when he says, “who was designated as the Son of God.” The three persons of the Godhead determined in eternity past who would be the Father, who would be the Son, and who would be the Holy Spirit. Paul’s statement here is not a reference to that determination, but to the declaration that came out of that determination. And this declaration (designation) was done “with power.” That is to say that the way

in which Jesus was declared to be the Son of God was with a powerful act - the resurrection from the dead.

The phrase “[according to the Spirit of holiness](#)” is not a reference to the third person of the godhead (the Holy Spirit) as may be inferred by the capitalization of the word “spirit.” This expression is grammatically tied to the expression “according to the flesh” in the previous verse. So, we see that Paul is conjoining the fact that Jesus was a descendent of David (demonstrating his humanity) and the Son of God (demonstrating his divinity).

Finally, the declaration of his divinity was proven by a powerful act: His resurrection from the dead. Keep in mind that there are other people in the Bible who are described as having been resurrected from the dead, including Lazarus who was resurrected by Jesus, and the widow’s son who was resurrected by Elijah. But these people eventually died again. Jesus did not. His resurrection to eternal life is the declaration that He is the Son of God. And because He is alive, we know that His promise of our own resurrection from the dead is real. Finally, the fact that He remains alive is our assurance that someday we, too, will be resurrected unto a life that will never end!

So What?

Paul started off this letter identifying himself as a slave of God. We say of anyone who is “saved,” that he or she has accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In this letter to the Romans, Paul says it this way, “... [if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved](#)” ([Romans 10:9](#)). In other words, in order to be saved, we have to confess the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Another way of saying that is, when we were saved from our sins, we became the permanent property of our Lord, and we should not be seeking our own desires and will, but His. And His will is that we obey Him and submit to Him. Are you a submitted slave today? Do you recognize who your Master is?

We Christians need to remember that we have been bought with a price and we are no longer our own, but we are the property of our Master. That’s easy to forget when we wander through this life seeking our own satisfaction. We need to keep in mind *whose* we are and constantly submit our will to His.

As I said earlier, Paul introduces the notion of the “Good News,” that is, the Gospel message. Now, the real question for us is not so much, “Do you know the gospel?” as it is, “Do you believe the gospel?” To know the historical fact that Jesus was crucified some 2000 years ago is really inconsequential. To believe the gospel, to accept the fact that you are a sinner and need payment for your sins, which payment Jesus Christ gave for you when He was crucified, is life giving salvation. And not merely physical life, but spiritual life as well -- for all eternity! Do you believe?

There are many today who do not believe that Jesus was a real person. There are also many people who believe that Jesus was a real person, but they don’t believe that He is God. They deny that He was resurrected from the dead; therefore, they don’t believe the good news (gospel), and they are destined for an eternity in the lake of fire for their unbelief. But we know that Jesus did rise from the dead and He is alive today! That is the glorious message that we have to proclaim to all. He’s alive!

Let’s pray.