

PAUL

SOLDIER OF PEACE

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Indianapolis, Indiana

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CONTENTS

Preface	9
1. Dear Romans	13
2. In the Hands of an Angry God?	25
3. How Salvation Works	39
4. The Human Condition	51
5. The Purpose of the Law	63
6. All Part of the Plan	79
7. How to Be Saved	95
8. Getting Along Together	107
9. In the World	121
10. An Early Faith Community	133
Notes	143

1

DEAR ROMANS

CLOSING A CHAPTER

Paul had never been to Rome. He had often wanted to go there (Rom. 1:13), but he had been very busy for at least a decade starting and establishing churches all around Greece and what we now call Turkey. Then at the end of what is now known as his third missionary journey, he wrote his best-known and arguably most magnificent letter to Rome. The year was perhaps as late as A.D. 58.

Paul probably wrote Romans from Corinth in southern Greece. In the last chapter, Paul commended a woman named Phoebe. This woman was a deacon of the Eastern port city of Corinth, a place called Cenchrea (16:1). So most scholars agree that Paul was in Corinth when he wrote Romans.¹

By the time he wrote Romans, Paul had confessed Jesus as his master for about twenty-five years. Before he believed, he persecuted some

early Christians. He was a Pharisee and put special emphasis on keeping the Jewish Law along with a large number of strict interpretations of it. He may have thought that God's anger toward Israel was intensified by Jewish Christians just as he thought it was intensified by those who disregarded the Pharisees' rules on how to stay pure. Since Paul worked for some of the leaders of Israel, he had the political power to cause problems for Jewish Christians.²

But sometime around the year A.D. 33, the risen Jesus appeared to Paul, who made a complete turnaround. The man who had strongly insisted on maintaining the boundaries between Jew and Gentile became a man who saw in Christ the breaking down of such barriers. Almost immediately, Paul found himself in trouble because of his preaching. Within three years (around A.D. 36), he had to escape the city of Damascus by going down a wall in a basket to avoid arrest (2 Cor. 11:32–33). Soon after, he cut short a visit to Jerusalem because some were trying to kill him (Acts 9:29–30).

Little is known of what Paul was doing during the next ten years of his life. The books of Acts and Galatians indicate he went back to his home country, Cilicia, a region on the southeast side of modern-day Turkey. Eventually, he was drawn to Antioch, one of the centers of Christian activity at the time, second only to Jerusalem. It was from Antioch in the northernmost part of Syria that Paul launched the missionary journeys recorded in Acts.

Paul's so-called first missionary journey (there likely were others that were not recorded) took him and a coworker named Barnabas to the island of Cyprus. Then they went north to the south-central part of Turkey (or Asia Minor, as it was known at the time). Many evangelicals believe that Paul wrote Galatians just after this trip, though I disagree. His second recorded journey, in the early 50s, took him to Greece for the first time. He spent about two years in and around the

city of Corinth. On this trip, Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians, which many scholars think was his first surviving letter. He may also have written 2 Thessalonians at this time.³

In the mid-50s, Paul spent about three years around the city of Ephesus, during his third recorded missionary journey. It was from there that he wrote 1 Corinthians and two other letters to Corinth that apparently did not survive. Although many disagree, I think Paul's stay at Ephesus ended with an imprisonment that is not recorded in Acts (see 2 Cor. 1:8) and that he wrote Galatians and Philippians during this period as well. When he was finally able to leave the city, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians on his way around the northernmost part of Greece and back to Corinth.

Paul—Messenger of Grace, the first volume of this set, ended right there, with Paul on his way to visit Corinth again.⁴ He first went to Corinth around A.D. 50–52. Paul also alluded to a second visit that was not recorded in Acts (2 Cor. 13:1). Then he prepared for a third visit. On this trip, which may have been his final one, Paul planned to take up an offering for the less fortunate among the believers in Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8–9). It was also on this third trip to Corinth that Paul wrote Romans, the fullest expression of his thinking.

Paul's comment in Romans 15:23 describes his thoughts about his situation as he wrote Romans: "There is no more place for me to work in these regions." Paul was still having conflict with the Corinthian church (2 Cor. 10–13). Earlier, he had sent them a harsh letter from Ephesus, one so harsh perhaps that neither Paul nor the Corinthians preserved it. When he wrote 2 Corinthians, Paul was unsure of what he would find when he reached the city (12:21). It seems that no one from Corinth joined the group that accompanied Paul on his journey to Jerusalem with the offering he had raised for the poor (Acts 20:4).

Paul decided not to return to Ephesus on this final trip; instead he invited the elders to meet him at Miletus (20:16–17). The writer of Acts

said that Paul was in a hurry. But if Paul’s previous visit to Ephesus ended in imprisonment (his brush with death mentioned in 2 Cor. 1:8 and Phil. 1:20–25 may have referred to this time), then he had good reason to bypass the city. Paul’s words in Romans, “There is no more place for me to work in these regions” (15:23), seems full of pathos. He was unable to return to Ephesus and the region around it. He had an uneasy presence at Corinth. Certainly he had many opponents in Jerusalem (see Acts 21:20–22) and perhaps even still at Antioch (see Gal. 2:11–13).

Paul’s letter to the Romans was written as one chapter of his mission was closing and another beginning to open. Paul was a church planter, not a long-term pastor (Rom. 15:20–21). He did not feel called to preach to Jews, but to non-Jews or Gentiles (see Gal. 2:7–8; Rom. 15:16–18). The door had closed for Paul in Asia Minor and Greece. So he began to look west to Rome and then Spain.

LOOKING TO SPAIN

If we only had the book of Acts for information about Paul’s life, we would probably conclude that his mission to non-Jews was the result of being continually rejected by Jews. We might think he targeted Jews and Gentiles equally but was better received by the Gentiles. However, Paul did not view his ministry in this way. He was delighted when Jews believed that Jesus was their promised King, their Messiah. But Paul’s primary calling and mission was to bring the good news to non-Jews. He was the apostle to the Gentiles, just as Peter was the apostle to the Jews (Gal. 2:8; Rom. 15:8–12, 16, 18).⁵

Paul also saw himself as a traveling minister rather than being called to a permanent location. He intentionally avoided preaching the good

news where someone else had already laid a Christian foundation (Rom. 15:20–21). Perhaps Paul’s life verse, which he quoted from Isaiah 52:15, could have been: “Those who have never been told of him shall see, and those who have never heard of him shall understand” (Rom. 15:20 NRSV).⁶

Paul was a church planter. He did not intend to stay in Rome for a lengthy time the way he had at Corinth or Ephesus or perhaps first at Tarsus. Instead, it seems he wanted to set up a mission base in Rome so that he could launch into the un-evangelized territory of Spain (Rom. 15:24).

Paul wrote Romans from Corinth on his way to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey to introduce himself to the already existing group of believers at Rome. He went to Jerusalem before Pentecost (Acts 20:16) with a large delegation from the various churches he had planted (20:4). Together, they brought a large offering for the needy among the Christians of Jerusalem (Rom. 15:25–27; see also Gal. 2:10).⁷

Paul was deeply interested in the Roman churches. He had often wanted to go to them but had consistently been hindered from making such a trip (Rom. 1:13). He hoped that by his visit they could share some mutual building up of each other’s faith (1:11–12). He wanted to “preach the gospel” to them, a good thing in itself (1:15).

But Paul’s ultimate destination was Spain. Rome was an important stop along the way, and Paul was looking forward to impacting the churches at Rome, but it was not his primary focus. He wanted to get to Spain, and Rome was a fitting place to minister on his way there. Paul might have also expected the churches at Rome to contribute to his mission to Spain just as the Philippians supported some of his earlier efforts.

The book of Romans was thus a letter of introduction to the churches in Rome, which he planned to visit on his way to Spain. While

introducing himself, Paul hoped to accomplish at least two other tasks. One was to provide an explanation and defense. Paul had enemies in the early church, and they were talking about him (Acts 21:21). Romans was a systematic defense of Paul's understanding of the gospel and especially, the question of how Gentiles could be saved without converting to Judaism.

The second task was corrective. Rome apparently had groups of stronger and weaker Christians, like Corinth. So Paul took time, while introducing himself and defending his presentation of the gospel, to address disunity among the churches of Rome.

PAUL'S DETRACTORS

Paul was apparently not popular with many of the believers in Jerusalem. When he arrived with his offering for poor believers, James and the elders took him aside to strategize about dealing with his opposition (Acts 21:17–26).

James and the elders informed Paul that most believers in Jerusalem had conservative views on the law. They were upset about rumors they'd heard that Paul was teaching Jews to abandon the law of Moses and not to circumcise their children or follow other key Jewish practices (21:21). To counter this unfavorable impression, the elders urged Paul to participate with other men in a vow they had taken and even to pay for the others' expense related to the vow. The goal was for everyone to see that Paul kept the Jewish Law, despite the exceptions James had made earlier for Gentile believers.

In Romans, Paul confirmed that false rumors had circulated about him. Some had apparently summed up his teaching as, "Let us do evil that good may result" (Rom. 3:8). This slogan was probably their version

of Paul's teaching that faith, not works of law, makes us right with God. So Paul explained that he did not condone sin, much less think that it enhanced God's grace (Rom. 6–8). At the same time, he did not consider disregarding certain parts of the Jewish Law, such as circumcision and matters of ritual purity, to be sin.

By the time he arrived in Jerusalem, perhaps some time around A.D. 58, Paul had been sparring with this “denomination” of Christians for quite some time. The author of Acts was more charitable than Paul toward this group. Paul called them “false brothers” (see Gal. 2:4), but the writer of Acts treated them as believers (see Acts 15:5; 21:20).

About ten years earlier, Paul had presented his teaching on Gentiles to Peter, James, and John. He did this privately, because he knew how controversial his teaching would be: a number of Jewish believers taught that you could only be saved if you fully converted to Judaism (Gal. 2:1–10). Though James preferred that Gentiles convert, he did not force them (Gal. 2:12), and this seems to have been the official position of the Jerusalem church (Acts 15).

But not long after this meeting, Paul had a disagreement with Peter at Antioch over Jewish and Gentile believers eating together, an argument he seems to have lost (Gal. 2:11–14).⁸ Despite his allowances for Gentiles, James had sent messengers to Antioch to make sure the Jews were still keeping purity rules. Paul disagreed with this action. He believed the purity rules were interfering with the unity of the church. Paul advocated instead that Jewish Christians lay aside these aspects of the Law when they prevented fellowship with Gentile believers. Since Paul did not say in Galatians that his opponents at Antioch conceded his point, it is likely they did not.

This argument probably contributed to the break-up of Paul and Barnabas as a ministry team, even though Acts only mentions an argument about Mark (15:36–40). So as Paul embarked with Silas on his

second missionary journey, he was somewhat on the outs with the churches of Jerusalem and Antioch.

James and the Jerusalem elders determined that Jewish and Gentile believers could eat together provided three conditions were met: (1) the Gentile believers did not bring meat that had been offered to another god; (2) they did not kill the meat by strangling, so that the blood stayed in the meat; and (3) they did not participate in sexual immorality (Acts 15:23–29). It seems Paul ignored these instructions, except the part about sexually immorality. Paul’s approach to the issue of meat sacrificed to idols was “don’t ask, don’t tell.” Don’t ask where the meat came from, and eat it with thanksgiving (1 Cor. 10:23–30).

Paul’s first draft of a response to his detractors who also insisted Gentile believers must be circumcised was the book of Galatians. Although some date it very early, I believe Paul wrote it at Ephesus on his third missionary journey. In it, he explained the purpose of the Jewish Law and how a person can be in right standing with God. I personally think Paul wrote Philippians at Ephesus as well, just a little bit later. In Philippians 3, Paul warned the Philippians to be on the lookout for his opponents, “those mutilators of the flesh” (3:2), meaning those who insist Gentiles must be circumcised.

The book of Romans was a later, more developed version of the same material. By the time Paul wrote this letter, he knew his opponents and their arguments well. He knew what others were saying about him, and he had been working on his response for years. He knew from experience what had and had not worked with his response in Galatians. Romans was thus Paul’s fullest, most mature defense of the gospel message he preached among the Gentiles. It was not written as a compendium of Christian theology; it was a letter written in a certain context to address a specific situation. But Paul wrote it as an introduction to what he believed and taught, and in that

respect, it is the most systematic presentation of his theology on these particular issues.

The church at Rome included both Jewish and Gentile believers. However, the bulk of Paul's rhetoric in the letter addressed Gentiles. Paul said, for example, that he wanted to have some fruit among them just as "among the other Gentiles" (Rom. 1:13). He said he felt responsible for both the Greek and barbarian—a way of dividing the Gentile world (1:14). Later, he explicitly addressed the Gentiles and warned them not to get cocky about God's favor toward them (11:13–14). Even when Paul did speak to Jews, he seemed to be speculating what Jews would say rather than directly addressing the reader (2:17). So while Paul surely expected some Jewish believers would read Romans, he primarily addressed Gentile believers, in keeping with his sense of the mission to which God had called him.

So Romans was a general defense of the gospel Paul preached among the Gentiles, paying particular attention to the objections and arguments his detractors had used against him, especially those in Jerusalem and Antioch. He explained that all have sinned, both Jew and Gentile, and that both thus equally rely on God's grace to be accepted by him (Rom. 1–4). He explained that Christ's obedience had undone the sin of Adam for everyone, both Jew and Gentile (Rom. 5). He addressed the purpose of the Jewish Law and the accusation that he condoned sin (Rom. 6–8). And, he described God's plan and how Jews and Gentiles fit into it (Rom. 9–11).

To a significant degree, the question of how Gentiles could be saved dominated the letter to the Roman church. How could Gentiles be part of the people of God without converting to Judaism? The book of Romans was not an abstract theology of how to get saved, as Augustine and others have led us to believe. When Paul talked about the law, he was not referring to some abstract moral law, but to a specific part

of the Jewish Law. When Paul talked about works, he was thinking of the parts of the Jewish Law that most separated Jews and Gentiles. The book of Romans was thus Paul's most developed response to his detractors.

LIFE REFLECTIONS

For several years, I have heard great pathos in Romans 15:23, where Paul mentioned in passing that he had no more room to minister in the eastern Mediterranean. We like to think of Paul as a great, hero missionary who experienced success in every area. But when Paul wrote this verse, it must have seemed like things could go either way. The hindsight of history is often clearer. Our experience of things in the moment often is far from clear.

It is amazing that Paul never gave up. Despite setbacks, he kept moving forward. Sometimes he had to move on the hard way. The Romans forced Paul to move on from Ephesus. He left Corinth without having everyone on his side.

We can draw some relevant truths from Paul's fortunes. First, we will never win everyone over to our sense of God's will and plan, no matter how hard we try or how eloquently we argue. Dale Carnegie once put it in this way, "A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still."⁹ The second truth is that there is a time to move on. It can be as simple as agreeing to disagree or as hard as wiping the dust off your feet. But there is a time to give up and move on.

Sometimes we think the early church was completely unified. The book of Acts contributes to this perception because part of its purpose was apparently to show that early Christians were not troublemakers, but were peaceful and harmonious. And indeed, this is how we are

supposed to be. The ideal presented in Acts is God’s word for us to emulate. But it is not and was not always the case, even in the early church. The early church had factions too, with distinct ideologies that were as different from each other as some denominations differ from each other today.

On some points, Paul and his opponents genuinely disagreed. His opponents taught what they believed in their communities, and Paul taught his understanding in his communities. On other points, his opponents seemed to have skewed his position to suit their goal of discrediting him. Perhaps they thought they understood him. Perhaps they intentionally skewed his thinking. It is sometimes hard to tell the difference.

While we hope always to agree to disagree and remain brothers and sisters in Christ, our disagreements can easily devolve into calling each other “false brothers” as well. Paul and Barnabas wisely went their separate ways and surely wished Godspeed to each other.

When others maligned Paul with malicious intentions, he did his best to protect his assemblies from their influence. Early on at Antioch, he seems to have argued with them face to face (Gal. 2:11–14). But at some point, he must have concluded that trying to convince them was a waste of time. He got to the Galatians only after they were already partially persuaded. He wrote the Philippians before his opponents arrived (Phil. 3:2–3, 17–19). And most of Romans was a defense of his understanding of the gospel to prepare the way for his anticipated arrival.

There is a point where we have to leave all such things in God’s hands. It is, after all, not about winning an argument or everyone seeing that we are right. God can take care of such things. If we are right, God will make this clear in the end. If we are not, God will make it clear in the end as well.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. For years the assumption in ministry has been if you are faithful, your church will grow in numbers. How accurate do you think this idea is? Can you think of places Paul went in Acts where he did not leave significant churches behind? Does it make any difference to realize that Paul's churches may only have been forty to fifty people in size?
2. Paul was clever, perhaps even inspired, in the way he used circumstances to move forward in his mission. What do you think is the proper mixture between God's leading and human cleverness in moving toward our goals?
3. Paul seems to have attracted enemies in many places—even in the church. Do you think this opposition was all Satan's work or can we learn from mistakes Paul might have made? Do you think the strengths of his personality were accompanied by weaknesses? Why or why not?
4. Philip Melancthon, who worked closely with Martin Luther, once called Romans a “compendium of systematic theology.”¹⁰ Many theologians have tried to make Romans into a system of absolute, ideological truth. But if Romans addressed a situation in the life of Paul and the Roman church—if it is a letter rather than a textbook—how does this fact change how we read it? Keep this question in mind as you move through the next five chapters.