

Background information for Romans

Paul

Romans was written by Paul the apostle. Paul likely wrote this letter around AD 57 while in Corinth. Nearing the end of his third missionary journey he has now been preaching the gospel for almost 25 years. Paul experienced God working in amazing ways to bring people to faith in Jesus and he has seen God establish churches in multiple cities. Paul also saw divisions among believers and the destructive influence of false teachers. Paul's plan was to travel to Jerusalem to deliver money he had collected to help poverty-stricken believers. Afterward, Paul intended to stop in Rome as he made his way to plant new churches in Spain. Prior to his travels, Paul was held up in Corinth. During this lull Paul wrote a letter to the church in Rome in preparation for his visit. When Paul wrote this letter he did not know that it would be three years before he would be coming to Rome, and coming to Rome as a prisoner.

Rome

Rome was the capital of the empire. It was wealthy, the center of trade and highly influential. Morality was not closely associated with religion which may have contributed to wide spread moral corruption. Roman religions also tended to be nonexclusive. The worship of one deity did not preclude the acknowledgement of other deities (Ferguson 161-165).

We do not know how the church in Rome was founded (Paul had not yet visited the city). Luke tells us that Jews from Rome were present on the Day of Pentecost (Act 2:10). Possibly some of those converted during the out pouring of the Holy Spirit on that day went back to Rome to found this church. At first the church would have been mostly Jewish but in A.D. 49 Emperor Claudius required all Jews to leave Rome. Priscilla and Aquila would have been included with those needing to leave Rome. Suddenly the church would become solely Gentile. Eventually Jews were allowed to return to Rome. In A.D. 57 Paul writes to a church that is both Jewish and Gentile. Jews, who were once the majority, now find themselves in the minority. Paul may be addressing tensions between these two groups in his letter.

The Letter

As we read Romans we need to remember that this is a letter and we should keep in mind that Paul is the author and his original audience is Christians in Rome. Remember the original intended meaning. Also, note the flow of the letter and how each section contributes to the overall theme. Paul is carefully developing a presentation of the gospel as a lawyer would present an argument to a court.

When we read this letter we can imagine how this first century Roman church would have understood Paul's teaching. At the same time we can allow the Holy Spirit to apply the message of this letter to each of us.

Sources

Moo, Douglas J. *The NIV Application Commentary: Romans*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000

Ferguson, Everett. *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993

Fee, Gordon D, and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003