

The Apostle Paul *in* Rome



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Rom. 15:20–27, Acts 28:17–31, Phil. 1:12, Rom. 1:7, Ephesians 1, Rom. 15:14.*

Memory Text: “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world” (*Romans 1:8, NKJV*).

It is important for a student of the book of Romans to understand the book's historical background. Context is always crucial when seeking to understand the Word of God. We need to know and understand the issues that were being addressed. Paul was writing to a specific group of Christians at a specific time and for a specific reason; knowing that reason as much as possible will greatly benefit us in our study.

Thus, let's go back in time. Let's transport ourselves back to first-century Rome, become members of the congregation there, and then, as first-century church members, let us listen to Paul and the words that the Holy Spirit gave him to deliver to the believers in Rome.

And yet however localized the immediate issues that Paul was addressing, the principles behind them—in this case the question *how is a person saved?*—are universal. Yes, Paul was speaking to a specific group of people; and yes, he had a specific issue in mind when he wrote the letter. But as we know, many centuries later in a totally different time and context, the words he wrote were as relevant to Martin Luther as they were to Paul when he first wrote them. And they are relevant to us as well today.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 7.

The Apostle Paul's Letter

Romans 16:1, 2 indicates that Paul probably wrote Romans in the Greek city of Cenchreae, which was near Corinth. Paul's mention of Phoebe, a resident of greater Corinth, establishes that place as the likely background for the letter to the Romans.

One of the purposes of establishing the city of origin of the New Testament epistle is to ascertain the date of writing. Because Paul traveled a lot, knowing his location at a particular time gives us a clue to the date.

Paul established the church at Corinth on his second missionary journey, A.D. 49–52 (*see Acts 18:1–18*). On his third journey, A.D. 53–58, he visited Greece again (*Acts 20:2, 3*) and received an offering for the saints in Jerusalem near the end of his journey (*Rom. 15:25, 26*). Therefore the Epistle to the Romans probably was written in the early months of A.D. 58.

What other important churches did Paul visit on his third missionary journey? *Acts 18:23*.

Visiting the Galatian churches, Paul discovered that during his absence false teachers had convinced the members to submit to circumcision and to keep to other precepts of the law of Moses. Fearing that his opponents might reach Rome before he arrived, Paul wrote a letter (Romans) to forestall the same tragedy from happening in Rome. It is believed that the Epistle to the Galatians also was written from Corinth during Paul's three months there on his third missionary journey, perhaps shortly after his arrival.

“In his epistle to the Romans, Paul set forth the great principles of the gospel. He stated his position on the questions which were agitating the Jewish and the Gentile churches, and showed that the hopes and promises which had once belonged especially to the Jews were now offered to the Gentiles also.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 373.

As we said, it is important in the study of any book of the Bible to know why it was written; that is, what situation it was addressing. Hence, it is important for our understanding of the Epistle to the Romans to know which questions were agitating the Jewish and Gentile churches. Next week's lesson will address these questions.

What kinds of issues are agitating your church at present? Are the threats more from without or from within? What role are you playing in these debates? How often have you stopped to question your role, your position, and your attitudes in whatever struggles you're facing? Why is this kind of self-examination so important?

Paul's Desire to Visit Rome

There's no question that the personal touch is the best way to communicate in most cases. We can phone, e-mail, text, and even Skype, but face to face, flesh to flesh, is the best way to communicate. That's why Paul announced in his letter to the Romans that he intended to see them in person. He wanted them to know that he was coming, and why.

Read Romans 15:20–27. What reasons does Paul give for not having visited Rome earlier? What made him decide to come when he did? How central was mission to him in his reasoning? What can we learn about mission and witnessing from Paul's words here? What interesting—and important—point does Paul make in Romans 15:27 about Jews and Gentiles?

The great missionary to the Gentiles felt constantly impelled to take the gospel to new areas, leaving others to labor in places where the gospel had been established. In the days when Christianity was young and the laborers few, it would have been a waste of valuable missionary power for Paul to work in already-entered areas. He said, "So have I strived to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man's foundation," so that "they that have not heard shall understand" (*Rom. 15:20, 21*).

It was not Paul's purpose to settle down in Rome. It was his aim to evangelize Spain. He hoped to get the support of the Christians in Rome for this venture.

What important principle can we take away regarding the whole question of mission from the fact that Paul sought help from an established church in order to evangelize a new area?

Read again Romans 15:20–27. Notice how much Paul's great desire was to minister and to serve. What motivates you and your actions? How much of a heart of service do you have?

Paul in Rome

“Now when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard; but Paul was permitted to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him” (Acts 28:16, NKJV). What does this text tell us about how Paul finally got to Rome? What lesson can we draw from this about the unexpected and unwanted things that so often come our way?

Yes, Paul eventually got to Rome, even if it was as a prisoner. How often our plans don't come out as we anticipated and hoped for, even the ones formulated with the best of intentions.

Paul reached Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey with his offering for the poor, which he had collected from the congregations of Europe and Asia Minor. But unexpected events awaited him. He was arrested and chained. After being held prisoner for two years in Caesarea, he appealed to Caesar. Some three years after his arrest, he arrived in Rome, probably not in the manner that he had intended to when he first wrote years before to the Roman church about his intention to visit the church there.

What does Acts 28:17–31 tell us about Paul's time in Rome? More important, what lesson can we learn from this passage?

“Not by Paul's sermons, but by his bonds, was the attention of the court attracted to Christianity. It was as a captive that he broke from so many souls the bonds that held them in the slavery of sin. Nor was this all. He declared: ‘Many of the brethren in the Lord, waxing confident by my bonds, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.’ Philippians 1:14.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 464.

How many times have you experienced unexpected twists in your life that, in the end, turned out for good? (See Phil. 1:12.) How can, and should, you gain faith from those experiences to trust God for the things where no good seems to have arisen?

The “Saints” in Rome

Here is Paul’s salutation to the church in Rome: “To all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ” (*Rom. 1:7*). What principles of truth, of theology, and of faith can we take away from these words?

Beloved of God. While it is true that God loves the world, in a special sense God loves those who have chosen Him, those who have responded to His love.

We see this in the human sphere. We love in a special way those who love us; with them there is a mutual exchange of affection. Love demands response. When the response is not forthcoming, love is limited in its fullest expression.

Called to be saints. In some translations the phrase “to be” is in italics, which means that the translators have supplied the words. But these two words can be left out, and the meaning will still be intact. When they are omitted, we get the expression “called saints”; that is, “designated saints.”

Saints is the translation of the Greek *hagioi*, which literally means “holy ones.” *Holy* means “dedicated.” A saint is one who has been “set apart” by God. He or she still may have a long way to go in sanctification, but the fact that this person has chosen Christ as the Lord is what designates him or her as a saint, in the Bible’s meaning of the term.

Paul says that they were “called to be saints.” Does this mean that some people are not called? How do Ephesians 1:4, Hebrews 2:9, and 2 Peter 3:9 help us to understand what Paul means?

The great news of the gospel is that Christ’s death was universal; it was for all human beings. All have been called to be saved in Him, “called to be saints” even before the foundation of the world. God’s original intention was for all humanity to find salvation in Jesus. The final fire of hell was meant only for the devil and his angels (*Matt. 25:41*). That some folk don’t avail themselves of that which was offered doesn’t take away from the wonder of the gift any more than someone who goes on a hunger strike in a marketplace takes away from the wonderful bounties found there.

Even before the foundation of the world, God called you to have salvation in Him. Why should you not allow anything, anything at all, to hold you back from heeding that call?

The Believers in Rome

“First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world” (Rom. 1:8).

It is not known how the congregation in Rome was established. The tradition that the church was founded by Peter or Paul is without historical foundation. Perhaps laypersons established it, converts on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem (*Acts 2*) who then visited or moved to Rome. Or perhaps at some later period converts moving to Rome witnessed to their faith in that world capital.

It is surprising that in just a few decades from Pentecost a congregation that apparently had received no apostolic visit should be so widely known. “Notwithstanding the opposition, twenty years after the crucifixion of Christ there was a live, earnest church in Rome. This church was strong and zealous, and the Lord worked for it.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1067.

“Faith” here probably includes the broader sense of faithfulness; that is, faithfulness to the new way of life they had discovered in Christ.

Read Romans 15:14. How does Paul describe the church at Rome?

Here are three items that Paul selects as worthy of note in the Roman Christians’ experience:

1. “Full of goodness.” Would people say this of us in their own experiences? As they associate with us, is it the abundance of goodness in us that attracts their attention?

2. “Filled with all knowledge.” The Bible repeatedly emphasizes the importance of enlightenment, information, and knowledge. Christians are urged to study the Bible and to become well-informed as to its teachings. “The words, ‘A new heart also will I give you,’ mean, ‘A new mind will I give you.’ A change of heart is always attended by a clear conviction of Christian duty, an understanding of truth.”—Ellen G. White, *My Life Today*, p. 24.

3. “Able . . . to admonish one another.” No one can thrive spiritually if isolated from fellow believers. We need to be able to encourage others and, at the same time, be encouraged by others.

What about your local church? What kind of reputation does it have? Or, even more important, does it even have one at all? What does your answer tell you about your local church? More important, if need be, how can you help improve the situation?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Mysteries of the Bible,” p. 706, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5; “Salvation to the Jews,” pp. 372–374, in *The Acts of the Apostles*. Read also *The SDA Bible Dictionary*, p. 922; and *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, pp. 467, 468.

“The salvation of humankind does not result from a divine afterthought or improvisation made necessary because of an unexpected turn of events after sin arose. Rather, it issues from a divine plan for man’s redemption formulated before the founding of this world (1 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 1:3, 14; 2 Thess. 2:13, 14) and rooted in God’s everlasting love for humanity (Jer. 31:3).

“This plan encompasses eternity past, the historical present, and eternity future. It includes such realities and blessings as election and predestination to be God’s holy people and bear likeness to Christ, redemption and forgiveness, the unity of all things in Christ, sealing with the Holy Spirit, reception of the eternal inheritance, and glorification (Eph. 1:3–14). Central to the plan is the suffering and death of Jesus, which was not an accident of history nor the product of merely human decision, but was rooted in God’s redemptive purpose (Acts 4:27, 28). Jesus was in truth ‘the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world’ (Rev. 13:8, KJV).”—*The Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald® Publishing Association, 2000), pp. 275, 276.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class, talk about the meaning of the Protestant Reformation. Think about this question especially: How different would our world be today without it?
- 2 Dwell more on the idea that we were called to have salvation, even before the foundation of the world (see also *Titus 1:1, 2; 2 Tim. 1:8, 9*). Why should we find this so encouraging? What does this tell us about God’s love for all humans? Why, then, is it so tragic when people turn their backs on what has been so graciously offered to them?
- 3 Dwell on the question at the end of Thursday’s study. How could your class help to improve your church’s reputation, if need be?

Saved by the Sabbath

Andre grew up in the western Ukrainian city of Lutsk. While at school, he became acquainted with Pavel, a student who attended a Seventh-day Adventist church on Saturdays. Being a nonbeliever, Andre didn't think much about when or where people went to church, nor did he care.

After finishing their high school education, both Andre and Pavel planned to study at the Lviv National Academy of Arts, so they went to Lviv to take the academy's entrance exam. After finishing the exam, the two decided to walk around the campus.

Suddenly, a large notice on an announcement board caught their eye—there was going to be an air show commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Ukrainian Air Force's 14th Air Corps. The event would be held at the Sknyliv Airfield, just six kilometers (3.7 miles) from central Lviv.

Excitedly, Andre and Pavel scanned the notice for further details. Then Pavel noticed the date of the air show: July 27, 2002. Realizing that day was a Saturday, he decided that he would not be going to the air show after all.

"Andre, I'm going to church on July 27—would you like to come with me?" Pavel asked.

Now it was Andre's turn to carefully consider the situation. He really wanted to go to the air show, but there was something so sincere about Pavel's invitation that Andre decided to accept. He wondered what could be so special about this church that would make Pavel choose to go there rather than to the air show.

Reflecting on that first visit to a Seventh-day Adventist church, Andre later recalled, "We spent the whole day there, and I really liked the church."

What Pavel and Andre didn't know was that while they were at church, the worst air-show disaster in history was taking place at the Sknyliv Airfield. With over 10,000 spectators watching, at 12:52 P.M. a Su-27 aircraft, flown by two experienced pilots, crashed and exploded into the crowd of spectators. Seventy-seven spectators were killed, including 28 children. Another 543 spectators were injured, 100 of those injured were hospitalized and suffered head injuries, burns, and bone fractures.

When Andre heard the news the next day, he was stunned. "That event made me realize that I could have died there or could have been severely injured. I became friends with the many young people at the Adventist church, and after attending regularly for one year, I decided to be baptized."

Later, Andre decided to change his career plans and studied at the Ukrainian Adventist Center of Higher Education in Bucha, to become a pastor. In 2004, part of the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering helped to build a dormitory at Bucha. In 2014, the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering helped to build or expand schools in Lviv, Cherkasy, and Vinnytsia, Ukraine, and establish an educational complex in Dnipropetrovsk. Thank you for supporting this important offering.

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