

Lesson 1: Introduction

Background, Greetings, and the Theme of the Epistle

Scripture Reading: Romans 1:1–17

Introduction

Paul's letter to the Romans is one of the weightiest books in the New Testament and also one of the most misunderstood. It addresses vital topics including justification by faith, the nature of man, and unity among brethren. In this lesson, we will survey the background of the letter, Paul's greeting and prayers, and the great theme of the epistle.

Background Information

The apostle Paul wrote Romans from Corinth around 58 A.D. while on his way to Jerusalem (Romans 15:25–26; Acts 24:17). The letter is divided into two parts: chapters 1–11 present the doctrinal arguments for justification by faith, and chapters 12–16 deal with practical applications and personal matters.

Paul's Greeting (1:1–7)

Paul opens by identifying himself as a servant of Christ, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel (1:1). This gospel had been promised through the Old Testament prophets (1:2) and is centered on Jesus Christ—both human, as a descendant of David, and divine, as demonstrated by the resurrection (1:3–4). Paul received his apostleship to bring about “obedience to the faith” among all nations (1:5–6), a phrase that shows obedience and faith work together rather than against each other (cf. Acts 6:7; Hebrews 5:9). The letter is addressed to the saints in Rome (1:7).

Paul's Thoughts and Prayers (1:8–15)

Paul was thankful for the Roman Christians, whose faith was known throughout the world (1:8). He prayed for them constantly and longed to visit them, though he submitted those plans to the will of God (1:9–10; cf. James 4:15). His reasons for wanting to visit included imparting spiritual gifts, being mutually encouraged, and fulfilling the debt he felt as an apostle to preach to all people (1:11–15).

The Theme of the Epistle (1:16–17)

The theme of the entire epistle is stated in verses 16 and 17. Paul declares that he is not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who

believes (1:16). In the gospel, “the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith” (1:17)—that is, God’s plan of making man righteous is made known, and it is received through faith. As the prophet Habakkuk declared, “The just shall live by faith” (Habakkuk 2:4).

Conclusion

The opening verses of Romans lay the groundwork for everything that follows. Paul establishes his apostolic authority, affirms the divine origin and Christ-centered content of the gospel, and announces the great theme of the book: the gospel is God’s power to save, and in it His plan for making man righteous is revealed. As we continue this study, we should carry with us the conviction that the gospel is something to be believed, obeyed, and proclaimed with boldness.

Thought Questions for Class Discussion

1. Paul says the gospel was “promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures” (1:2). Why is it important to understand that the gospel was not an afterthought but part of God’s plan from the beginning? How does this strengthen your confidence in the message we preach today?

2. In Romans 1:5, Paul states that his mission was to bring about “obedience to the faith” among all nations. Some argue that faith and obedience are opposed to each other. How does Paul’s language here, and in passages like Acts 6:7 and Hebrews 5:9, show that obedience is an essential part of genuine faith?

3. Paul desired to visit the Romans “by some means” and submitted his plans to “the will of God” (1:10; cf. James 4:15). In practical terms, what does it look like to make plans for our lives while still being genuinely submitted to God’s will?

4. Paul says he is “not ashamed of the gospel of Christ” (1:16). What are some situations in our culture today where Christians may be tempted to feel ashamed of the gospel, and how can we overcome that temptation?

5. The theme of Romans is that the gospel reveals “the righteousness of God from faith to faith” (1:17). In your own words, explain what you understand “the righteousness of God” to mean in this context, and discuss why this concept is so central to the entire book of Romans.