

## **Introduction to Paul's Letter to the Church in Rome**

### **The New Testament Book Known As Romans**

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Romans is probably the greatest of Paul's letters and the widest in scope. Some of the greatest leaders of Church history came to their understanding through Romans (St Augustine Chapter 13 - Martin Luther, Verse 17 Chapter 1, John Bunyan Pilgrim's Progress, John Wesley from Luther's preface to the commentary on Romans). It may be the greatest (most encompassing) letter ever written.

- Paul wrote the letter in about 56-58 AD, from Corinth while on his third missionary journey.
- Corinth was a notoriously wicked city and much of the depravity of that city was likely in Paul's thoughts as he wrote the letter to the believers in Rome.
- The letter was written about 30 years after Jesus was crucified and resurrected. Memories of those events were still very fresh on the minds of the Saints when Romans was written.

Paul wrote his letter to teach the Christians in Rome, instruct them and bring to their remembrance the meaning of the fantastic events relating to Jesus' life, death and resurrection that had so startled and amazed men in that 1st century

#### **The historical context when Paul wrote his letter to the church in Rome:**

If we place Jesus' crucifixion within the documented dates of Pontius Pilate serving as Prefect of Judea (26 - 36 AD), his death is generally ascribed as occurring between the years 30 and 35 AD. This period in Roman history is important for the foundation Christianity because of the social conditions where it all originated. Judea and the Palestine were governed by Rome, and the people in their zeal for religious freedom and their own ideology, were often openly hostile to foreign rule (especially Pagan or polytheistic faiths). Indeed many were resistant to their own King Herod for a multitude of reasons, but in part for what was deemed to be an oppressive government. Jesus' teachings, under the concepts of Jewish law, taught of social equality, harmony and the freedom of men to decide their own fate. These ideas led to a small, yet slowly growing following for a new hope and idea, in a time when the appearance of oppression and inequality from Rome, their own governing authorities, and spiritual leaders was front and center in the Jewish public eye.

The emergence of Christianity in the Roman Empire after the crucifixion of Jesus was based on many factors, and its spread was an indication of massive social upheaval and changing environments. One might think the death of its leader would stop the growth of a movement cold, but Jesus' death became a rallying cry for martyrdom that dominated the early religion.

The Jewish Christians spread slowly in the general region, and established themselves in Syria, but real advancement occurred under the work of the early missionaries. James the Just (sometimes referred to as the brother of Jesus) remained in Palestine and is understood to be the earliest leader of the Jewish Christian sect. Thaddeus went east to Armenia which would eventually (4th century) become the first official Christian state. Peter

went to Rome, while other apostles spread the word elsewhere. Perhaps the most important of all the early missionaries though, was Paul of Tarsus. His tireless efforts in Greece, Asia Minor and throughout those provinces which make up modern Turkey helped establish pockets of Christians all over the east. His writings are the source for much of the early Church doctrines and they paint a vivid portrait of its early struggles and strategies.

It is impossible to determine the number of Christians throughout the empire in this earliest formative period or how quickly it caught hold, but Paul's missions changed the scope from one of a Jewish sect to the belief we know as Christianity. While the Jewish sect was markedly different from the Gentile persuasion that followed, many of the basic principles in conducting one's life remained similar enough to allow a cross-cultural conversion. As Paul's mission spread, its most likely appealing teachings were the messages of equality in the eyes of God and eternal life in his kingdom. The poor, slaves, women and those who felt disenfranchised with the Roman social system, which offered very limited upward mobility, gravitated eagerly to this new idea of hope after death. The early Christians were more easily converted in places far from the central Roman authority, and the religion took root in the east. Though it would later become a much more urban practice, in which cities were largely Christian and rural Paganism would survive for centuries, Rome was slow to acknowledge its spread. It would not be long, however, before Rome did take notice of this subversive movement and the early Christians were forced to practice their faith in secrecy.

### **Persecution of Christians:**

As Christianity gained a foothold in the consciousness of the ancient world, the Roman authorities initially reacted slowly. As Jewish Christian migrations, and certainly the work of Peter, brought the new movement to Rome, it became largely identified with the Jews. As the Jews, with their one God concept, and refusal to adopt the Roman Caesar worship ideology, were so largely associated with the early Christians, the belief got off to a very inauspicious start. This refusal of typical Roman religious custom wasn't just an issue of a damaged ego for the Roman elite, but a serious undermining of the religious tradition incorporating the ideas of many cultures and practices. The Romans had little concern over either Jewish or Christian practices on their own; it was their steadfast dedication to their own gods that would eventually lead to problems.

The relationship of early Christianity to the Jewish faith, and the foundation of the belief deeply rooted in a people accustomed to religious intolerance actually helped it take hold initially. The Jews were accustomed to resisting political authority in order to practice their religion, and the transition to Christianity among these people helped foster the sense of Imperial resistance. To the Romans, Christians were a strange and subversive group, meeting in catacombs, sewers and dark alleys, done only for their own safety, but perpetuating the idea that the religion was odd, shameful and secretive. Rumors of sexual depravity, child sacrifice and other disturbing behavior left a stigma on the early Christians. Perhaps worst of all was the idea of cannibalism. The concept of breaking bread originating with the last supper, partaking of the blood and body of Christ, which later came to be known as Communion, was taken literally. To the Romans, where religious custom dictated following ancient practices in a literal sense, the idea of performing such a ritual as a representation was misunderstood, and the early cult had to deal with many such misperceptions.

The first mention of Christians from a perspective of Roman government intervention occurred under Claudius. The limited description is provided by Suetonius, the somewhat gossip oriented historian of the 'Twelve Caesar's':

*"Since the Jews were constantly causing disturbances at the instigation of Christ, he (Claudius) expelled them from the city (Rome)."*

### **Members of the early Church in Rome:**

Since it was the center of the Roman Empire, there would have been a small Jewish population in Rome. These would have been Jews that had made their way to Rome for commerce, taken there against their will as slaves or

other reasons. At least some of these Jews likely accepted the Jesus as the Messiah and joined the Christian church (Followers of The Way). Other followers probably began worshiping Christ in cities like Corinth or Antioch and then came to Rome, bringing their beliefs with them. The early church probably had members who were slaves, former slaves, Jews from other places and a few Roman converts. The beliefs of the Way would have appealed to the slaves in Rome.

### **House Churches in Rome:**

Romans held the belief that Caesar was a god and Roman law required the acknowledgement of that belief. Since Christians observed a monotheistic religion (worship of the one true God) they were forbidden to observe their worship in a public setting and therefore could have no public places of worship. This led to the formation of house churches, where believers met in the home of a leader family for worship. These worship settings were still outside the law, but were allowed, or at least they were not stopped by the Roman authorities.

### **Method of Worship for the Early Church in Rome:**

Typically, believers would gather together in the Home of one of the believers for a communal meal and then to share the stories of Jesus. Many were still Jews at heart and in their observance of worship. They would have followed the traditions of Jewish worship, where a person would share scripture and then expound on the passage they explained. It would have been the same with the new Christians. They would have shared passages from the Jewish Bible (Septuagint) and then stories about Jesus (the aphorisms of Jesus, the parables of Jesus and the early gospel writings). When letters (epistles) became available, such as Paul's letters 1 Thessalonians and 2 Thessalonians letters (51-52 AD), Galatians (53 AD) Philippians (53 AD), Philemon (53 AD), 1 Corinthians (54-56 AD), 2 Corinthians (54-56 AD), Romans (57 AD), Colossians (60s AD), Ephesians (60s AD), 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy (66-67 AD), they would have shared these, too. As soon as the Gospels began to be copied and circulated, they would have been adopted as texts for use in worship.

Suggested time line:

30 AD Jesus crucified in Jerusalem

33 AD Saul of Tarsus converts to Christianity (The Way)

37 AD Tiberius Dies Caligula succeeds him

41 AD Caligula Succeeded by Claudius

44 AD Judea annexed as Roman Province after the death of Herod Agrippa

47 AD Rome celebrates 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of founding as a city

49 AD Claudius issues an edict expelling all Jews from Rome

Paul preaches Christianity in Greece

50 AD Claudius adopts Nero as heir

54 AD Claudius dies, Nero ascends to throne

60 AD Earliest Gospels composed

62 AD Paul executed in Rome

James (brother of Jesus) executed by Sadducees

64 AD Great fires of Rome – speculated to have been started by Nero to make room for his palace.

Christians persecuted as scapegoats.

Peter executed in Rome

## Addendum:

### Post "Letter to the Romans" Persecution of Christians

In spite of persecution under Claudius Christians remained in Rome, and by the reign of the next emperor, Nero, the first major incident of Christian persecution took place in 64 AD. The fire that ravaged Rome in that year, and the subsequent building of Nero's golden palace on the destroyed property was wildly unpopular in Rome. Many placed blame directly on Nero, accusing him of intentionally lighting the fire, in order to build his palace. Nero, seeking an unpopular scapegoat, turned the blame on the subversive Christians, playing on people's fears that their intention was the complete destruction of the Roman world as they waited for the judgment day. Tacitus the invaluable Roman historian, writing years later, described Nero's response with some detail:

*"Neither human resources, nor imperial generosity, nor appeasement of the gods, eliminated the sinister suspicion that the fire had been deliberately started. To stop the rumor, Nero, made scapegoats--and punished with every refinement the notoriously depraved Christians (as they were popularly called). Their originator, Christ, had been executed in Tiberius' reign by the Procurator of Judaea, Pontius Pilatus (who was actually a Praefectus, not a Procurator). But in spite of this temporary setback, the deadly superstition had broken out again, not just in Judaea (where the mischief had started) but even in Rome. All degraded and shameful practices collect and flourish in the capital. First, Nero had the self-admitted Christians arrested. Then, on their information, large numbers of others were condemned--not so much for starting fires as because of their hatred for the human race. Their deaths were made amusing. Dressed in wild animals' skins, they were torn to pieces by dogs, or crucified, or made into torches to be set on fire after dark as illumination.... Despite their guilt as Christians, and the ruthless punishment it deserved, the victims were pitied. For it was felt that they were being sacrificed to one man's brutality rather than to the national interest."*

Suetonius added his own short confirmation:

*"punishments were also inflicted on the Christians, a sect professing a new and mischievous religious belief."*

This persecution wasn't aimed directly at the Christians in order to drive them out of Roman consciousness. Instead they provided an easy alternative target to the blame, which was being cast directly on the Emperor. Still, Tacitus' description provides an in-depth look at the early Roman perception of Christianity. As he suggests, however, Nero's violence likely did little to stop the spread, but instead helped spur its growth.

Under Domitian, just a generation later, some sources indicate another persecution directed at Christians. Operating with the knowledge that Christians refused adhering to the Imperial Cult of Caesar worship, Domitian may have launched an investigation, sending a team to Galilee to discover the roots of Jesus. Though evidence is sketchy, it does indicate at least a general knowledge and adversarial relationship between the Emperor and the cult. Domitian has also been accused of mass executions of Christians, which is true, but it wasn't necessarily a purge targeted at that single group. Domitian ruled in an almost tyrannical reign of terror in which many perished, not just Christians. Political enemies, 'divisive' groups and individuals of all kinds met terrible fates. Though he too, may have used the excuse of Christianity to justify some murders, there is little evidence that he had a personal agenda against the cult.

Shortly after Domitian, the Emperor Trajan and the Governor of Bithynia-Pontus, Pliny, leave a record of Imperial attitude towards Christianity. In this period, Trajan forbid meetings of secret societies, and their potential for subversion, which would include the Christians. Though Trajan's reign indicates a slight shift towards tolerance, there

is little doubt that Christianity created problems for the administration and led to punishment for those who practiced it. Pliny writes in a letter to Trajan (c. 112 AD):

*"I have never been present at an examination of Christians. So, I do not know the nature or the extent of the punishments usually dealt out to them, nor the grounds for starting an investigation and how far it should be carried...For the moment this is the line I have taken with all persons brought before me on the charge of being Christians. I have asked them in person if they are Christians; if they admit it, I repeat the question a second and a third time, with a warning of the punishment awaiting them. If they persist, I order them to be led away for punishment; for whatever the nature of their admission, I am convinced that their stubbornness and unshakeable obstinacy ought to be punished. There have been others similarly fanatical who are Roman citizens; I have entered them on the list of persons to be sent to Rome for punishment... I considered that I should dismiss any who denied that they were or ever had been Christians, once they had repeated after me a formula of invocation to the gods and had made offerings of wine and incense to your statue (which I had ordered to be brought into court for this purpose along with images of the gods), and furthermore had cursed the name of Christ. Real Christians (I understand) can never be induced to do these things....They declared that the sum total of their guilt or error amounted to no more than this: they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately among themselves in honor of Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves by oath, not for any criminal purpose, but to abstain from theft, robbery and adultery, to commit no breach of trust and not to refuse to return a deposit upon demand. After this ceremony it had been their custom to disperse and later to take food of an ordinary harmless kind. But they had in fact given this up since my edict, issued on your instructions which banned all political societies. This made me decide it was all the more necessary to extract the truth from two slave women (whom they call 'deaconesses' by torture. I found nothing but a degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths... I have therefore postponed any further examination and hastened to consult you..."*

Trajan replies giving evidence of a general procedure of punishment for Christians, while also indicating that there is no need to seek them out:

*"You have followed the right course of procedure, my dear Pliny, in your examination of the cases of persons charged with being Christians. For it is impossible to lay down a general rule to a fixed formula. These people must not be hunted out. But if they are brought before you and the charge against them is proved true, they must be punished. But in the case of anyone who denies that he is a Christian, and makes it clear that he is not, by offering prayers to our gods, he is to be pardoned as a result of his repentance-- however suspect his conduct may have been in the past. But pamphlets circulated anonymously must play no part in any accusation. They create the worst precedent, and are quite out of keeping with the spirit of our age."*

Trajan's successor, Hadrian, seems to have continued a mostly indifferent approach to Christianity, provided they didn't engage in open hostility. Instead, massive uprisings of Jews led to harsh punishment. This punishment meted out to the Jews, involving massive expulsions from eastern settlements, is clearly identified as separate from Christianity. This is important in that, the Christians by now were growing beyond the Jewish roots and was becoming more and more a religious option for Gentiles. Still though, Hadrian and those in authority still must've identified some Jews and Christians as part of the same group and its impossible to think that some Christians didn't meet a similar terrible fate under his rule.

Under Marcus Aurelius, the so-called stoic emperor, Christianity continued to be identified in a similar way to that of Trajan and Hadrian. Marcus Aurelius, however, had a personal dislike of Christianity, and though he continued the practice of not seeking them out for punishment, persecutions during his reign, especially those in Lyons (c. 177 AD) were particularly bloody. Shortly thereafter, in the reign of Commodus, who was much maligned for personal debauchery, there seems to be a slight shift in favor of Christians. By this time, the religion was definitely beginning

to become more common among Romans of means and influence. A concubine of the Emperor, by name of Marcia, apparently negotiated the release of Christian mine workers, who must've lived under deplorable conditions.

Though the attitude towards Christianity was beginning to change, wide spread acceptance was still a long time off. Some sects, such as the Montanists of the 2nd century adhered to encouraging death by persecution. Not only would this advance the faith through martyrdom, it would bring the victim closer to Christ, by following in his footsteps. By the later 3rd century, however, Christian persecution from imperial sources was beginning to decline. Instead the infighting between various sects of the faith became the source of persecution. The Pagans too, in much later periods, would suffer as terrible atrocities as the early Christians. Despite this switch, one more great persecution was still to occur. Under the Eastern Emperor Diocletian, beginning in 303 AD and lasting for 8 years, he and his successor Galerius began a systematic purge of Christians. While many certainly perished, most were displaced from home and property. Many migrated west where the Imperial authority was more tolerant by this point. However, in places like Syria, Egypt and Asia Minor, the Christians certainly suffered terribly. Diocletian though, seems to have relented as he approached his own deathbed. He ordered the discontinuation of his aggressive policy, if only the Christians would pray to their god on his behalf. This final persecution against the now massive religion would soon be supplanted by the coming of Constantine and would not yet gain Imperial favor but certainly complete tolerance.

Despite the sporadic persecutions, Christianity was persistent. Between the beginnings of the cult through the Great Persecution of Diocletian, some estimates have placed the death toll as high as 100,000 people during that period. Others, like the ancient source Origen, list the number of Christian martyrs simply as 'relatively few'. Edward Gibbon, the 18th century writer lists the number at 'less than 2000', but the truth of the matter will never be known for sure and these numbers are also dependent on semantics. Some viewed the concept of 'martyrdom' as any Christian who had been killed for any reason. Others defined it more conservatively as only those that were executed in defense of their religion. Regardless, by 337 AD and the ascension of Constantine as sole Emperor, the population of the Christian world continued to surge forward. As many as 25 to 30% of the population of the Roman Empire (15 to 20 of 60 million people) has been estimated as being Christian. Together with other similar monotheistic cults, like those of Mithras and Sol Invictus, the old Pagan traditions were slowly becoming a thing of the past.