

LESSON 3

When we ended last week, we were looking at Question #5 from our list of 20 questions on the Lesson 1 Handout: **What was the history of the city of Rome?**

Last week we saw that Rome was the center of the empire, that Rome had a massive slave population, that Rome had harsh and rigid social divisions, and that Rome was suspicious of anything coming from the outside, such as a new religion.

Many missionaries would have written Rome off as impenetrable and infertile soil for spreading the gospel of Christ. But that was not Paul's attitude.

Romans 1:15 (ESV) — So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

And I think we can learn an important lesson from Paul's attitude toward Rome. We have been commanded to go into all the world — not just into those parts of the world where we think we might have the best chances while ignoring those other areas that seem like poor soil to us.

Sometimes, even today, those who obey the gospel the quickest are those we might have been the most tempted to write off as a lost cause. The gospel is for all! And so we must proclaim it to all! That is the command of Christ in Mark 16:15 — “Go into **all the world** and proclaim the gospel **to the whole creation.**” And that command is very hard to misunderstand!

Last week we said that the church in Rome would have included a cross section of Roman society, but I think we can also safely say that most of the Christians in Rome would likely have come from the lower classes of Roman society.

What that means is that most Christians in Rome would have lived in large multi-story apartment buildings with cramped rooms, no running water above the first floor, the constant threat of fires and building collapses, and frequent outbreaks of disease.

As for the religions in Rome at this time, they can be divided into four categories:

- **Traditional Roman religions** including the **State Cults** (such as the temples to Jupiter and Vesta), the **Imperial Cult** (worship of the emperor, although that was much more common out in the provinces than in Rome), and the **Household Gods** (for private family worship).

- **Mystery Religions and Foreign Cults** such as **Mithraism** (worship of the Persian god Mithra, which was popular among the soldiers), **Isis and Serapis** (imported from Egypt), and various **Greek mystery cults**.
- **Judaism:** Judaism was a permitted religion under the Roman system. At times Jews made up about 5% of the city of Rome, although, as we will see, they were at one point expelled from the city. There were at least 11 synagogues in Rome in Paul's time.
- **Christianity:** For a time, Christianity was treated with the same legal tolerance as Judaism because of its Jewish roots. But as perceptions of the church shifted, hostility toward Christians grew. Soon after Paul wrote this letter, the church in Rome would face fierce persecution from the Emperor Nero.

To summarize, when Paul wrote this epistle, Rome was a city of contrasts: great grandeur with terrible squalor, rigid order with underlying chaos, and imposed unity with great cultural diversity. And, as we study Romans, we need to remember that backdrop of the city of Rome.

(6) What was the history of the church in Rome?

I think we can trace the history of the church in Rome back to a single phrase in Acts 2:10 — “**and visitors from Rome.**” Among those listening to Peter preach the first gospel sermon in Acts 2 were visitors from Rome.

And what did those visitors from Rome do after their visit to Jerusalem was over? They returned to Rome, but some of them returned as new creatures! Some of them returned to Rome as Jewish Christians. I think that is almost certainly how the church in Rome began.

And, yes, some today argue that Peter established the church in Rome and then ruled from Rome as the first Pope. But we know that wasn't true. Anyone who has studied Romans knows that wasn't true.

Not only did Peter not establish the church in Rome, but I think we can say that no apostle established the church in Rome. Why? Because of what Paul will tell us toward the end of this letter.

Romans 15:20 (ESV) — And thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, **lest I build on someone else's foundation.**

How could Paul say that if Peter, as some say, was at that very time ruling the church in Rome that he himself established? And why in Romans 1:11 would Paul say that he wanted to see them so that he could impart some spiritual gift to them if there was an apostle already there in Rome able to do that? And if Peter was in Rome, why didn't Paul greet him in Romans 16? Why did Paul write this letter at all if Peter was already in Rome?

I think the conclusion is inescapable. Yes, there was a church in Rome, but no, it had **not** been established by an apostolic visit. That was why Paul was so eager to go to Rome and preach the gospel there.

And if we ask which Apostle had the biggest impact on the church in Rome, I think the Biblical answer is Paul rather than Peter. The only hint we have in the Bible that Peter was ever in Rome is found in 1 Peter 5:13, where most believe that "Babylon" is a cryptic reference to Rome. In any event, it seems that Paul certainly ahead of Peter in getting to Rome.

And so, with Peter out of the way, let's ask this question: who had the biggest impact on the church in Rome **prior** to Paul's letter to Rome and Paul's visit to Rome?

I think the answer to that question is clear, but I also think the answer is surprising — the person who had the biggest impact on the church in Rome prior to Paul was the Roman Emperor **Claudius**.

What did Claudius do that had such a big impact on the church in Rome? To answer that question, we need to look again at the book of Acts.

Acts 18:1-2 (ESV) — After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, **because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome.**

What Claudius had done was issue an edict expelling all of the Jews from the city of Rome. That was why Priscilla and Aquila had come to Corinth from Rome in Acts 18.

But before we look at the impact of that edict on the church in Rome, let's look at the edict itself.

Extra-Biblical evidence confirms that Claudius ordered the expulsion of the Jews from Rome. Suetonius wrote:²

2. Suetonius: *The Lives of Caesars, The Lives of Illustrious Men*: Translation (J. C. Rolfe, Trans.; Vol. 2, p. 53). The Macmillan Co.; William Heinemann Ltd; Harvard University Press.

“Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [Claudius] expelled them from Rome.”

The 5th-century historian Orosius places that edict in the ninth year of Claudius’s reign, which would have been AD 49. And that date fits well with the events in Acts 18 if Paul arrived in Corinth around AD 50, a year after the edict.

Why were the Jews expelled from Rome? The quote we just read from Suetonius answered that question: the Jews were expelled because they “constantly made disturbances at the instigation of **Chrestus**.” If, as seems certain, “Chrestus” refers to Christ, then the expulsion of the Jews from Rome was caused by a dispute among the Jews about Christ.

Now, back to my earlier question: who had the biggest impact on the church in Rome prior to Paul? And, again, the answer is Claudius. But why? To answer that, let’s think about what happened in the church in Rome after the Jews were expelled.

The church in Rome was *initially* composed entirely of Jewish Christians. Why can we say that? Because those early Romans who heard Peter in Acts 2, who obeyed the gospel in Acts 2, and who then returned to Rome were certainly *Jewish* Christians.

But that all changed as the Apostles began to teach and convert Gentiles following the conversion of Cornelius. Some of those Gentile converts must have traveled to Rome, and, once in Rome, they must have become aware of the Jewish Christians already worshiping in the city — and I suspect that, as usual, there was some friction between the two groups.

What was the situation in AD 49 right before the edict? By then, there must have been both many Jewish Christians and many Gentile Christians in the church at Rome. There were certainly enough Jewish Christians to come to the attention of the Emperor, and, with Rome being the center of the Empire, I think we can safely assume that there were many Gentile Christians in Rome as well.

But then Claudius issued his edict. What happened then? What happened was that the church in Rome went from being a mixture of Jews and Gentiles to being exclusively Gentile.

And so the church in Rome, which had started off as exclusively Jewish, and which had then become a mixture of Jew and Gentile (with the Jews likely having the primary role given that they were there first), had overnight become exclusively Gentile (with the Gentiles now, by necessity, having the primary role).

That dramatic change occurred in AD 49, with the edict of Claudius. But Claudius wasn't through impacting the church. Claudius did something else important in AD 54 — he died! And it seems that his edict died with him.

How do we know that? We know that because of something Paul will say toward the end of this letter:

Romans 16:3-4 (ESV) — Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well.

By the time this letter was written, Priscilla and Aquila were back in Rome! That tells us that the edict was no longer in place. And it also tells us that the letter to the Romans was written during the reign of Nero, who began to reign in AD 54, after the death of Claudius.

So what happened in the church at Rome after Claudius died? What happened is that the church once again became a mixture of Jews and Gentiles — but this time the Gentiles likely had the primary role due to having had all the roles during the period of the expulsion.

So, to review, what had happened in the church at Rome prior to Paul's letter? It had started off entirely Jewish; it had slowly become both Jewish and Gentile; overnight it had become entirely Gentile; and then five years later it had quickly become both Jewish and Gentile again. And the backdrop to all of that turmoil would have been the usual friction between the Jewish and Gentile Christians that would have existed even without that edict!

And we think we have some turmoil and friction in our congregations today! We don't have anything like what the church in Rome experienced in a very short period of time.

And what was Paul's message to this mixed and likely contentious group of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians?

- Paul told them there was **no distinction** between Jew and Gentile in the church (Romans 10:12).
- Paul told them that the Jews and the Gentiles in the church were **all one in Christ** (Romans 12:5).
- Paul told them that they all needed to be very careful how they handled disputes in the church about food and holy days (Romans 14).

But to whom was Paul writing all of these things? Just the Jewish Christians? Just the Gentile Christians? Primarily the Jewish Christians? Primarily the Gentile Christians? Both of those groups? That question is a later question on our list, so stay tuned!

(7) What was Paul's relation to the church in Rome?

The first thing we should say about Paul's relation to the church in Rome is that, as of the date of his letter, Paul had never been to Rome. He wanted to go, but so far he had not been able to do so.

Romans 1:10-13 (ESV) — Always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. **For I long to see you,** that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you — that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. I want you to know, brothers, that **I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented),** in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles.

Romans 15:22-24 (ESV) — This is the reason why **I have so often been hindered from coming to you.** But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since **I**

have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while.

And perhaps this is a good example of being careful what you pray for! Why? Because when Paul was finally able to go to Rome, he arrived there as a prisoner.

Acts 28:14-16 (ESV) — ...And so we came to Rome. And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, **Paul thanked God** and took courage. And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, **with the soldier that guarded him**.

And what was Paul doing when he arrived in Rome under guard? We just read it — **Paul was thanking God!** Paul was glad to be in Rome no matter how he got there! That tells us a lot about how much Paul loved the church in Rome.

And let's think for a moment about what Agrippa said to Festus at the end of Acts 26.

Acts 26:32 — And Agrippa said to Festus, “This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.”

In Agrippa’s view, Paul should never have appealed to Caesar because then Paul would have been freed right then — and, who knows, Paul might lose his appeal, which could mean his death in Rome. I’m sure that Agrippa thought that Paul must have been kicking himself now for having made that appeal.

But did Paul regret that appeal? I don’t think so. Instead, what we find is that Paul was now being sent exactly where he had always wanted to go! And when Paul gets there, we find him thanking God! What we would likely see as a disaster, Paul saw as an opportunity! And what a lesson there is for us in that!

Now, having never been there, we might expect Paul not to have known anyone in Rome — but that is not what we find in this letter. Instead, in Romans 16, Paul greets people in Rome by name! How do we explain that if Paul had never been there?

We have already hinted at the answer to that question when we talked about Priscilla and Aquila. They are among the Christians greeted by name in Romans 16, and we have already seen how Paul met them in Corinth prior to their return to Rome. I think

we will find that the others greeted by name have a similar explanation, but let's wait until we get to Romans 16 to look at those issues.

But some have explained the personal greetings in Romans 16 differently. They argue that Romans 16 does not belong with this letter, but instead was mistakenly taken from some other letter and then tacked onto the end of Romans. That argument is wrong, but we will have an entire question later in our introduction devoted to purported textual problems with Romans such as that one — so let's wait until we get there to look at whether Romans 16 really belongs with Romans 1-15.

But we can ask one question now — if Paul had never been to Rome, then why did he write them a letter? On the Handout for Lesson 1, that question is the next question. And although it follows naturally from the question we just looked at, I now think it fits better right before we talk about the themes of the book in Question #13, and so for now let's hold off on Question #8 and move on to Question #9.

(9) When and where was Romans written?

To answer both the where and the when of Romans, we need to look at Paul's third missionary journey, which is illustrated by the map on the Handout for Lesson 3.

Let's start with the question of *where* — **where was Paul when he wrote Romans?** Let's look at the clues:

- In Romans 16:1, Paul commends to them Phoebe, who is “a servant of the church at **Cenchreae**,” which was the eastern seaport of **Corinth**. They are highlighted in yellow on the left side of the Handout. (The beginning and ending points of the journey are highlighted in yellow on the right side of the Handout.)
- In Romans 16:23, Paul writes: “**Gaius**, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you.” In 1 Corinthians 1:14, **Gaius** is listed as one of the Christians in **Corinth** who had been personally baptized by Paul.
- Also in Romans 16:23, Paul writes: “**Erastus**, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, greet you.” And in 2 Timothy 4:20, Paul says that “**Erastus** remained at **Corinth**.”

Also, an inscription discovered in **Corinth** bears the name “Erastus” and describes him as a city official.

- In Romans 15:25, Paul says that he is about to travel to Jerusalem with a contribution for the saints. In Acts 20:2-3, we find that Paul stayed in Greece three months before leaving for Jerusalem with that contribution. This visit to Greece in Acts 20:2-3 may have been Paul’s third visit to **Corinth**, which he mentions in 2 Corinthians 13:1. We should note that in Paul’s time, the name “Greece” often referred to Achaia, and the both capital and commercial hub of Achaia was the city of **Corinth**. And so, Paul’s three month stay in Greece in Acts 20 was most likely a three month stay in Corinth.

And so what do have? When we look at the people who are greeted and who send greetings in Romans 16, when we look at what Paul tells the Romans he is about to do, and when we compare that with what we read in Acts and the Corinthian letters, the evidence suggests that Paul was in **Corinth** when he wrote the letter to the Romans, and most commentaries agree with that conclusion. I think the letter to the Romans was written while Paul was in Corinth in Acts 20 on his third missionary journey.

Now that we have figured out **where** Paul was when he wrote Romans, let's look at the second question — **when was Romans written?** To answer that question, we need to figure out the timing of Paul's three month stay in Corinth in Acts 20. In answering that question, we find an important clue in Acts 18.

In Acts 18:12 we meet the proconsul, **Gallio**:

Acts 18:12-16 (ESV) — But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal, saying, "This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law." But when Paul was about to open his mouth, **Gallio said to the Jews,** "If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, O Jews, I would have reason to accept your complaint. But since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves. I refuse to be a judge of these things." And he drove them from the tribunal.

Gallio's appearance in the Bible is very brief, but from a timing perspective it is very important. Why? Because extra-Biblical evidence tells us that Gallio held his post as proconsul only for a short time in AD 51-52. That is why this event in Acts 18 involving

Gallio has been called “the most accurately known date in the life of Paul.”

But how does that event in Acts 18 help us answer our question about Paul’s three month stay in Corinth in Acts 20? Simple. We start with the date we know, and then we march forward in time until we get to Acts 20. If we do that, it seems that the events in Acts 20 are about 5 years after the events in Acts 18, which would date Paul’s three month sojourn in Corinth to AD 56-57.

Is there any way to check our answer ? Yes, there is. As we said earlier, the Emperor Claudius died in AD 54, and apparently his expulsion order died with him. That would explain why Priscilla and Aquila were in Corinth in AD 51-52 according to Acts 18:2, but back in Rome by AD 56-57 according to Romans 16:3.

And so, where and when was Romans written? I think the evidence tells us that Romans was written by the Apostle Paul while he was in Corinth either in AD 56 or 57, which would have been about 25 years after the events in Acts 2 and about 20 years after Paul saw Christ on the road to Damascus.