

# Introduction to the Letter of Paul to the Roman Church

Much of what we believe as Western Christians is based on the letters of Paul. The Letter to the Romans is the most important among them. It encapsulates Paul's understanding of human salvation from sin. Most of the writings of Paul are pastoral, dispensing advice or instructions to congregations he established or individual members of his team. Romans is distinctly theological, addressing the nature of salvation, the nature of God, and our relationship with God.

We should begin this discussion with the question, "Who was Paul?" Paul, was actually Saul. And Saul is reported to have been born in the City of Tarsus in Asia Minor in the first decade of the First Century of the Common Era. Some say around the year 5 CE. Tarsus was a historical city in ancient Asia Minor, which is now a part of modern-day Turkey. Saul was a Pharisaic Jew, who reportedly studied under the great Rabbi Gamaliel in Jerusalem, and was also an enemy of the Jesus Movement. He was a Roman citizen, which was rare for a Jew.

How did Saul become Paul? Contrary to some beliefs, he was not given a name change upon conversion to the Jesus Movement. Paul is likely a diminutive or nickname for Saul. For example, in our community, Nico is a diminutive used for Nicolas, and Chuy is a diminutive used for Jesús. So, Paul was not his formal name, but the name used in his community.

According to Acts Chapter 8, a young Saul was in Jerusalem and witnessed the stoning of Stephen. He then received letters of authority from the High Priest to go to Damascus and arrest the men and women of the Jesus Movement. It was on this trip that Saul experience his conversion to the Jesus Movement. This would have been in the middle of the third decade of the of the First Century of the Common Era.

Following his conversion, Paul spent three years in Arabia, and then went to Damascus in Syria. After that period, he went to the Taurus region of southern Turkey, and was eventually called to Antioch, an ancient Greek city, now a part of Turkey. So, it is some approximately twelve to fifteen years after his conversion that Paul writes his first epistle, the Letter to the Thessalonians. We have few details of his activities during this long period before the writing of First Thessalonians or information on how his theology was evolving.

From this period forward, Paul produced a total of seven letters that survive, ending with the Letter to the Romans. Historically, Paul is credited with writing thirteen or fourteen books of the New Testament. Textual analysis over the past two centuries has concluded that only seven of these books were written or dictated by Paul: **First Thessalonians** (c. 50 CE), **Galatians** (c. 53 CE), **First Corinthians** (c. 53–54 CE), **Philippians** (c. 55 CE), **Philemon** (c. 55 CE), **Second Corinthians** (c. 55–56 CE), and **Romans** (c. 57 CE). A minority of scholars continue to maintain that Paul wrote thirteen epistles.

The consensus among the majority of scholars of the New Testament is that Colossians, Second Thessalonians, Ephesians, First Timothy, Second Timothy, and Titus were written either by members of the Pauline school or by individuals seeking to give their work the aura of genuine Pauline theology. Hebrews in an altogether different style of work and though of the highest quality is not the work of Paul.

The Paul that writes the Letter to the Romans, is a mature man, probably in his sixth decade. He is no longer the young headstrong Pharisee that was converted on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus. He will probably face death within ten years or so. He is determined to go to visit the church in Rome, and to conduct one final missionary journey to Spain. And so, he writes to the brothers and sisters in Rome, a group he has never met, to tell them of his plan.

Romans is Paul's last and longest epistle. In it, he focuses on the nature and righteousness of God, our relationship with God and each other, salvation, and the Christian community. Unlike some earlier epistles, he does not announce the imminent coming of Jesus with his army of angels to set all things right and take the saints, body and soul, with him to their reward. He has accepted that he will not see this hoped for event in his lifetime. In Romans, he turns to the here and now, and how 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE Christians should live in it. It is unlikely that he would have expected his letter to the church in Rome to be in circulation twenty centuries later on a continent he did not know existed.

This is a challenging work, full of difficult concepts and ideas, and also challenging to some of our personal beliefs and understandings in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It is also a very rewarding work, full of spiritual insights that can benefit the reader who is open to its rewards. It was written to a community in a distant land, with different

customs and understandings of human nature, nearly two thousand years ago. Over the next months, we will attempt to learn what it can teach us about life as Christians today.

28 July 2020