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Romans Overview (Part 1)



Bible Book Overviews - Steve Gregg

This overview provides insight into the book of Romans, a crucial text in the New Testament. Written by Paul to the church in Rome, the book addresses tensions between Jewish and Gentile members of the church, focusing on the need for salvation and the remedy found in faith in Christ. Paul emphasizes that following Jewish law and rituals does not make one deserving of salvation, and his argument is centered on the point that both Jews and Gentiles must be justified through faith in Jesus Christ, rather than their works or adherence to specific laws and practices.

Transcript

Well, each month we get together and do an introduction and an overview of a one of a successive book of the Bible. Last time we did Acts, and so we're in Romans now. And just as an introduction to the book of Romans, we need to understand that it's considered by many to be one of the most important books in the New Testament.

Many people have told me it's their favorite, though I'd have to say I don't have a favorite book of the New Testament, though I'd probably pick one of the Gospels above any of the epistles, though I love the epistles, too. Apart from Jesus, Paul has always been my greatest hero all my life, so anything he wrote is valuable and everything he wrote is inspiring, at least if you can understand it. And that's the thing, a lot of things Paul said are hard to understand.

And that's something that Peter said in 2 Peter chapter 3. He was talking about Paul and talked about all of Paul's epistles, in which he said there's some things hard to understand, which those who are unstable and unlearned twist to their own destruction as they do the rest of the Scriptures, Peter says. So Peter obviously considered Paul's epistles to be scripture, and this is the first of them that we're coming to. Perhaps I could have given an introduction to the Pauline epistles before getting into Romans, but I didn't think of that, so we'll just get into Romans.

But there are many things in Romans and in his other epistles that are not that easy to understand. In Romans, there are things that can be understood one way or a different

way, depending on the perspective. And I'm going to be bringing a perspective to Romans that's somewhat different from that which I learned growing up, because frankly I believe it's essential to do so in order to get Paul's meaning.

The traditional way of looking at Romans probably comes to us from Luther. I'm not sure if it began with him, maybe someone before him had it, but the Lutheran approach to Romans has been followed by Protestants and most Protestant commentators pretty consistently. I taught it that way for many years, and then somebody I'd say probably 30 years ago or more challenged me on a point, just one point in Romans that I had taken for granted, because all the commentators agreed with that point.

And that challenge got me thinking about it, about the particular point, and about the way it fit into the overall picture of Romans to the point where I actually had to see Romans a whole new way. And I will say this, this is something that I worked through with some difficulty because I had been pretty much conditioned to see it a certain way. And in much later years, I had occasion to listen to N.T. Wright and his lectures on Romans, and although I don't know that he agrees, and he and I don't agree probably on everything, I was very happy to see that he appeared to approach Romans in general with the kind of paradigm that I had come to see it.

So you'll be the judge, but just so you know that Romans is usually seen a certain way, and of course I see much of it the same, but there are some some aspects that have been used by certain theological camps. Obviously, frankly, Calvinists have some favorite parts of Romans that they lean heavily upon, and again I think that they do so because they view Romans through a certain lens which has come down from the Reformation and if we just kind of try to look at it for what's in it and don't have either a Roman Catholic or a Reformation lens, and we just try to follow the train of thought, I think we find some some interesting things that I haven't heard taught very often, which I will be sharing as we go through it. Romans is to a very large extent the book that is responsible for the Reformation.

It was as Martin Luther, who was a Catholic monk, was teaching in a Catholic University. As he was teaching through Romans, he came to realize that Paul is saying that we are not justified by doing religious works, which of course is a very different mentality than he had held as a Roman Catholic monk. He had been tormented in his conscience.

He is a very unhappy Catholic, perhaps a happier Catholic would have never spawned the Reformation, but he was a very unhappy Catholic because he was tormented in his conscience. He always felt like he couldn't do enough of the kinds of things that would justify him before God, and we discovered this doctrine of justification by faith alone. It changed his whole life.

And another important figure, and we could probably name very many if we were thinking of lesser figures, but Luther is obviously very significant, another very

significant figure who was converted through listening to lectures on Romans. Actually, it was while he heard a preacher reading Luther's introduction to Romans, and as he again heard this doctrine of justification by faith, he felt his heart strangely warmed, it is said, and he was converted. He knew he was born again.

That was John Wesley, whose theology is quite different than that of Luther's and of Calvinists too, but who he and his brother and very few others were almost single-handedly responsible for saving England from social disaster simply by preaching the gospel and converting a very corrupt nation, which was on the verge of revolution, or at least was, I don't know if it was on the verge of revolution, but all of the elements were there that had caused a revolution in France, which was a bloody, terrible revolution, and almost all historians argue that the ministry of the Wesleys essentially prevented that from happening in England as well. So Wesley, very important man, Luther, a very important man, and very different in their theology, but both converted really by the book of Romans. And frankly, I only mention them because they're so well-known.

I've heard of very many other both commentators and preachers and so forth who indicate that they were pretty much converted through Romans. Now, my former pastor, Chuck Smith, was not converted through Romans. He was raised in a Christian church, but I remember him saying it was reading Romans that really just opened his eyes to the liberty that we have in Christ and justification by faith, and he was not an insignificant man in modern times.

So maybe we need to pay very close attention to this book because it has, you know, the Word of God. Paul says in Romans 1:16 that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to those who believe. So as we look at Romans, we're going to be confronting that power of God to salvation.

Now, of course, this book was written to a church. Paul wrote most of his epistles to churches. There's a few individuals he wrote to, obviously Philemon, Timothy, and Titus received personal letters from him, but the rest of his epistles were to churches.

He wrote to seven different churches. Some of them he wrote to twice, notably Corinth and Thessalonica, but this church was a church he had had no actual contact with previously to our knowledge, though he had become acquainted with many of the people who were in it, apparently somewhere else. Paul had never been to Rome, but for example, we read in chapter 16 that Priscilla and Aquila had a house church in Rome and Paul had met them in Corinth on an earlier occasion and had lived with them and labored with them for 18 months in Corinth.

He had moved on from there to go back to Jerusalem where he got arrested and they had gone back to Rome and were there when Paul wrote the letter. So he knew them, you know, the hosts of at least one of this, probably several house churches in Rome. There's some evidence in chapter 16 there might have been at least five house churches

in Rome.

He only mentions the house of Priscilla and Aquila when he's talking about this. He talks about greetings to them and to the church which is in their house, so we know that they had a house church, but in addition to that he mentions other people less well-known to us and mentions those who are with them which suggests maybe there were groups of people meeting together in separate places who he greets them as separate congregations. He talks about in verse 10, greet a Pele is approved, this is chapter 16 of Romans, greet a Pele is approved in Christ, greet those who are of the household of Aristobulus.

Now the word household is an italics, it's not in the Greek, but just of the blank of Aristobulus which might mean a group that met in his house as others met in the house of Priscilla and Aquila. Likewise, Narcissus is mentioned in verse 11, he greets those who are of the blank of Narcissus, the King James, the new King James put in the word household. But there's also in verse 14, greet Asynchrodus, Phlegon, Hermas, Petrobud, Hermes and the brethren who are with them.

So there's a group of people who are with this particular group of people and then in verse 15, greet Philologus and Julia, Nerus and his sister and Olympus and all the saints who are with them. So there's one house church mentioned, then there's a couple of places who we don't know what the association was but there are those who are of the blank of these individuals, possibly, probably the house churches of. And then these other two people or groups of people who are mentioned have those who are with them, apparently separate from the others.

This is, you know, in the early church there's only one church in any city, that's why Paul writes to the church in Philippi or the church in Thessalonica, the church in Corinth. But there's only one church in Rome but there are different congregations. The thing is, how that differs from our churches today because there's only one church in Buena Park, or in whatever town you live in, there's only one church there.

But there are multiple congregations. The difference is that the churches in Rome, the congregations or in any city that had multiple congregations, were all seeing themselves as one church. They all read the same letters, they were all known by Paul, they all answered to the Apostles, they all were expected to read a letter that came from Paul.

In other words, they were one body of Christians in Rome simply meeting in different places. Whereas nowadays there are many congregations in any given town but they don't all have the same authority that they recognize. They have different translocal associations we call denominations and they are more loyal, any given denominational church is usually more loyal to the other churches around the world of their denomination than they are to the other churches down the street of a different denomination.

So the church is divided in a way that Paul actually would not have approved of as we see from 1 Corinthians 1. But nonetheless, having separate congregations does not predict for disunity and Paul assumed that all these churches, all the saints in Rome, were going to read this letter and recognize him as the Apostle that he was. This church was in, of course, the center of the Empire, the Roman Empire, controlled territory from Britain all the way to India, I believe, and down into North Africa. And it was, of course, the main world empire of the world and it was ruled by the Caesars.

At the particular time this was written, Nero was the Caesar, which becomes significant when you come to Romans 13 and realize that Paul's telling people to submit to governmental authorities and yet Caesar killed both Peter and Paul later on some years after this was written. However, Nero was not persecuting Christians at this particular time. The church in Rome had experienced some difficulties through Emperor Claudius.

Emperor Claudius, earlier than Nero obviously, had banished all Jews from Rome. There's reference to this in 1 Corinthians, I'm sorry, not in 1 Corinthians, in Acts when Paul comes to Corinth in Acts 17. And there's also a reference to it in Roman historians, they mentioned this, that the Jews, it says in either Suetonius or Tacitus, one of the Roman historians mentions that all the Jews were banished from Rome by Claudius because of disruptions that were occurring over Christus, which is probably a misspelling of Christus, which is Christ.

And that would make sense. There was always conflict between Jews and Christians, that is unconverted Jews who didn't accept Christus and the Christians who did. And apparently there were such problems being caused that Claudius, the Emperor, thought these guys are just troublemakers, get all the Jews out of here.

Now, not all the Christians were Jews, but some of the Christians were. And so when all the Jews were banished from Rome, the Christian Jews were banished also. And we find that Priscilla and Aquila were among those who were banished there.

I mentioned 1 Corinthians, excuse me, Acts 17, it's actually Acts 18 where Paul comes to Corinth and he meets Priscilla and Aquila and stays with them because they were tentmakers. It says that they had been banished from Rome because of the decree of Claudius, which is again a decree we know about from secular history as well. However, when Claudius died, it is probable that many of the Jews who had been banished from Rome, who still had connections there, went back.

We know that Priscilla and Aquila did because by the time Paul wrote Romans, they were back in Rome again. Now, Claudius' decree was probably around 49 or 50 AD, and Claudius' death was in 54 AD, which sometime between those times is when Paul would have run into Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth. And it was after that time, after Claudius died, many Jews and Jewish Christians went back.

Now, one impact this would have on the church in Rome would be that the church before the decree of Claudius had been Jews and Gentiles who believed in Christ, but the decree of Claudius in around 50 AD would have removed all the Jewish elements of the church, which means that until his death four years later or so, the church in Rome was all Gentiles. Now, we don't know very much how this church was founded, but it was probably initially founded by Jews. We say that only because we don't know how it was founded, but we know some possible ways it was founded.

Paul didn't find it founded. We don't know of any missionaries from the Church of Jerusalem that ever sent out to Rome, but we do know that at Pentecost, in Acts chapter 2, among the Jews who were in Jerusalem when the Spirit fell, there were some from Rome. There's a list of locations that the Jews had come from for Pentecost and who were in Jerusalem when the Spirit fell.

Very good chance, very likelihood that some Jews from Rome got converted at Pentecost and then eventually found their way back to Rome and shared their faith with others, and a church would spontaneously have been founded. We know that several churches did start that way. One of them was the church in Antioch.

It was started almost inadvertently because of persecution over Stephen's death. Jewish Christians from the Jerusalem church went up to Antioch and evangelized both Jews and Gentiles. Later, the Church of Antioch sent out missionaries to the Gentiles.

They sent out Paul and Barnabas initially, then later they sent out Paul and Silas as a team, and then Barnabas and Mark as another team, but we don't know of any of them going out to Rome. We don't know of any teams sent to Rome, so the church in Rome might have started kind of spontaneously just from Jewish Christians coming back from Pentecost or who knows. We really don't know how it got started, but all theories about how it got started would suggest that it was Jewish Christians who were the first part of the church.

Obviously, Gentile Christians came to be part of it too, but when the Jews were banished from Rome by Claudius' decree, only the Gentiles were left. Now, the church probably had a Jewish flavor before that because, frankly, you know, it wasn't until the Jerusalem Council that it was even officially decided that Gentiles don't have to really take on Jewish culture. So, it's likely that the church in Rome before 50 AD was Jews and Gentiles and had probably a slightly Jewish flavor to it, probably a little bit Torah observant types, although the Jews of the Diaspora in Rome would not be quite as Torah observant as maybe the Judean Jews were, simply because they didn't have the temple there and couldn't go there as frequently.

But, nonetheless, they still kept Torah to a certain extent, obviously. And the Gentiles who then were converted probably were brought under kind of as at least a quasi-Torah observance, although maybe not too much because they weren't circumcised and Jews

already had a policy that Gentiles could be among them but not accepted as, you know, themselves. I mean, there were different classes of Gentiles that would sometimes...there were pagan Gentiles, which was the vast majority of global paganism was what the Gentiles were defined by, but there were in places where there were synagogues, even prior to this, there were pagans like Cornelius, for example, who's in Caesarea, a Gentile who was a God-fearer.

That is, there were Gentiles who were God-fearers. That means that they didn't want to worship the pagan gods. They didn't want to become Jews.

That would require being circumcised, but they did want to, in some respects, honor the Jewish God. And like I say, Cornelius in Caesarea was one of those. There'd be plenty of those in Rome.

And so probably the Gentile Christians had joined the Jewish Church without becoming very Jewish in their practice. They're not circumcised in all likelihood. In fact, it's clear from Romans that the Gentiles were not.

But nonetheless, they revered God. And so the Jewish Christians probably welcomed them into the church, but with kind of a subnormal status. But when the Jews left, when they were banished by Claudius and the church had no Jews in it for four years, it would naturally have taken on much more of a Jewish, a Gentile caste.

If it's all Gentiles, it's gonna have much less influence toward Torah observance. These are uncircumcised Gentiles, so they're not really Torah observant anyway. So they have much more liberty.

They have much less Jewish flavor to their behavior in the church. But then in 54 AD, when Claudius died, these Jews who had been banished come back to Rome, including the Jewish Christians, and they come back to a church that had been more their style before they left, more Jewish oriented. But now they're coming back to a Gentile church where people don't keep Sabbath, people don't eat kosher, people don't observe the Holy Days.

They're Gentiles. They don't have any interest in doing those things. The Jews, Jewish Christians, still would be interested in those things, and therefore there was a bit of a conflict between the Jews in the church and the Gentiles of the church.

And Paul has to tell them in Romans 14, hey, those of you who are keeping these special days and special diet, don't judge those who aren't. And those of you who aren't doing it, don't despise those who are. Let everyone be fully persuaded in his own mind.

And so we see there's many evidences, especially the first several chapters of Romans, that give evidence that this was a major issue when Paul wrote the book of Romans, namely that there were some bad blood between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile

Christians, and he wanted to address that. The time of writing is the winter of 56-57 AD, and Paul is at the end of his third missionary journey. He's in Corinth when he writes the letter, and he's already on his way home to Jerusalem.

Now he's going to Jerusalem to deliver to the Jews a gift, the Jewish Church specifically, a gift of money, because the Jewish Church had been under persecution, and there'd been a famine, and they were hurting financially. So Paul, knowing that there's always some conflict between his mission and the Jerusalem Church, because he was a little light on the Torah-observing subject, and the Jewish Church in Jerusalem was a lot heavier on it. And some of the Jewish Christians were not fond of Paul very much, because he was welcoming uncircumcised Gentiles and so forth.

Now at this point, the Jerusalem Council had already decided that Paul was okay with that, that was okay. Even the Jerusalem apostles allowed it. But still, Jerusalem was very culturally Jewish and very temple-observant themselves.

They might have said, okay, it's okay for Gentiles not to be, but we still do that kind of thing. So that was a cultural, maybe even a slightly racial, friction in the church between the Jews in Jerusalem and the Gentile churches. So Paul, in order to kind of heal that wound, went among his own converts and took up a collection of money to take to Jerusalem and give to the church there, just sort of an olive branch they're holding out.

And also because they had needs. I mean, he's not just trying to manipulate a peace where there wasn't peace, but he was also concerned about the needs of them. And we read in chapter 15 of Romans that that's the mission he was on when he wrote the letter.

In fact, let me just show you this in chapter 15. He says in verse 22, For this reason I also have been much hindered from coming to you. The reason that he gives is that he had a policy of not building on another man's foundation.

He didn't want to preach the gospel where someone else had already been. And he had always longed to come to Rome. And he says that in chapter 1. He says, I have many years wanted to come and visit you, but I was hindered till now.

But in chapter 1, he doesn't say what hindered him. Now he tells us what hindered him was his policy. Rome had already been reached.

Rome had already had someone evangelize them. And there was a lot of territory between Antioch, where Paul began his ministry and Rome, which had not been evangelized. And since he had a policy of not preaching the gospel where Christ was already known, he could not justify going to Rome because there's so much territory that had not been evangelized and Rome had been.

So he was hindered, he said, for a very long time from going to Rome by this unfinished mission. However, he makes it very clear here that he has now preached the gospel to

all the major places between Antioch and Rome. So now he's planning not only to go to Rome, but to go further west to Spain also.

And he's going to hope to stop in at Rome and see these people on his way to Spain. But he was currently moving eastward from Corinth to Jerusalem. He tells us, he says, but now no longer having a place, verse 23, Romans 15, having a place in these parts and having a great desire these many years to come to you, whenever I journey to Spain, I shall see you on my journey and to be helped on my way there by you, if first I may enjoy your company for a while.

But now I'm going to Jerusalem to minister to the saints, for it pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia, that's Greece, to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem. It pleased them indeed and they are their debtors, for if the Gentiles have been partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister to them in material things. Therefore, when I have performed this, that is when I've delivered this money to Jerusalem, and have sealed to them this fruit, I shall go by way of you to Spain.

So that's his plan when he's writing. Now he didn't realize he's gonna be detained because he hoped to go to Jerusalem, drop off this gift, you know, say hello to his friends, and then catch ship for Spain and stop in Rome on the way there. That was his plan when he wrote this in 57 AD.

What happened though is he got arrested in Jerusalem. He got thrown into prison in Caesarea, which is in Israel, for two years. And then he took ship.

Well, after he appealed to Caesar, he was transported by government expense to Rome, and they got shipwrecked on the way there. And it was at least three years after he wrote this letter before he was able to actually show up in Rome. And when he did, he showed up in chains and on foot because he was shipwrecked and he had to walk from Malta to up to Rome pretty much most of the way in chains.

But he got there. Now he didn't know that was all gonna happen when he wrote this. He had plans to be actually in Rome soon after this, but it didn't work out quite the way he hoped.

The material in the Book of Romans will look very familiar to anyone who's read Galatians. Galatians and Romans have many of the same concerns, and that was due to the confusion as to the law and what it had to do with identifying someone as one of God's people. The Jews, of course, had hundreds of years of conditioning to believe that they were God's people and the Gentiles were not because God had given the Jews the law, the Torah, and they kept it.

Particularly circumcision was a very major issue, and Sabbath keeping a very major issue

with them. There was also, of course, the dietary things and the festivals and other things related to the Torah that made the Jews distinct. Now when Paul talks about works of the law in a negative sense, as he frankly does in Galatians and in Romans, he's not thinking specifically of laws like you shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall honor your father and mother.

Those are not the laws he's disparaging. Those were not the laws that distinguished Israel from the Gentiles. The Gentiles also had laws requiring respect for parents, and murder was a crime in most Gentile nations, and adultery was censured wrong, and theft could be punishable at law in almost every Gentile nation.

I mean, they weren't Christian nations, but they had some sense of decency and they had legal codes, and therefore the moral issues in the law of Moses were not the things that distinguished them from all the other Gentiles. There certainly were pagans that didn't observe these kinds of codes, but many Gentiles had, at least their philosophers, Roman philosophers and so forth, often had high moral standards, and they'd be against murder and adultery and theft and slander and disobedience to parents. So those kinds of laws which were in the Torah were not the ones that Paul's addressing when he talks about the works of the law, and there being no need to keep the works of the law.

He's talking about the laws that distinguished Jews from Gentiles, which were specifically the ritual laws associated with temple worship and circumcision and those kinds of things. And so when Paul speaks against works of the law, we have to realize he's not thinking of moral issues. He's thinking of the things that were the pride of Israel, the things that made them feel they were God's people, especially.

In fact, he actually confronts them in chapter 2, saying, well, you keep glory in the law, but you say people shouldn't commit adultery, but do you commit adultery? You say people shouldn't steal, but do you steal? In other words, he's implying they do. Their morality is no better than that of the Gentiles in many cases, but what were they boasting in? They were boasting in circumcision and in Sabbath-keeping and in the dietary laws that distinguish them from Gentiles. They thought that by having the law and being circumcised, that made them special to God in ways that Paul is saying it doesn't.

There are things that make a man special to God, but it's not that. It's, you know, being righteous. It's having faith in God, having loyalty to God, loving God, loving your neighbor.

Those are the things that God values, but circumcision and Sabbath-keeping, those are not the things that God values. And yet the Jews simply had been conditioned to believe that the Gentiles were, they were all a lesser breed without the law, and it made it very hard in a fellowship of Jews and Gentiles for the Jews who still kept much of the laws, at least kosher and so forth, to look down, to not look down on the Gentiles who they had

always seen as unclean, uncircumcised, dirty people. We know that that's the case because Peter himself, even as an apostle well into the book of Acts in chapter 10, had to be, had to have this driven through his skull by Jesus in a vision where these unclean animals were lowered in a sheet, and three different times this happened sequentially before Peter got it through his head, but a voice of Jesus said, kill these animals and eat them.

And Peter said, I'm a Jew, I don't eat unclean foods. I never do that. And Jesus said, well, I've cleansed, don't you call unclean or common? Meaning, of course, the message was he was supposed to go to Cornelius's house, an uncircumcised man.

Jews wouldn't go into a Gentile's house, but Jesus is saying, don't call them common, I call them clean. So it was hard for the Jewish Christians, even the apostles, except for Paul apparently, to adjust to the idea that Gentiles, uncircumcised Gentiles, could be as clean in the sight of God as Jews who were circumcised. And that was, I believe, the friction that was being caused, and both Galatians and Romans addressed this, though from a different angle.

In Galatians, Paul is addressing a church largely of Gentile Christians who are being courted by Judaizers, who are telling them that they need to be circumcised, and they need to keep the law. And Paul's writing to the Galatians saying, don't listen to them for a moment. Don't you, he says, I wish those people would be cut off, who's telling you that.

They're trying to destroy you. If you've bought into their doctrine, you've fallen from grace, and you're estranged from Christ, and Christ will profit you nothing. Paul's very strong in this.

Gentiles who buy into Jewish forms of righteousness that were not really righteous, but just rituals, are actually buying into a religion that is not Christian. And a religion that, by the way, has always been anti-Christian. It was the Jewish religious leaders who crucified Jesus.

It was they who sent Paul, or Saul, out to persecute Christians. It was they who, everywhere Paul went, stood up trouble against him. So, obviously, the Jewish religion from day one, from the day that Christ began to castigate the Pharisees, has always been anti-Christian as it is today.

But Paul was telling the Galatians, don't submit, don't be intimidated when these people try to put you under Torah. It'll profit you nothing. And if you go that direction, Christ will profit you nothing, because you're choosing an anti-Christian religion instead of choosing to follow Jesus.

Paul's, you know, mentality was, we don't follow a law, we follow the Lord, Jesus. We're

followers of Jesus. What he does, what he says, that's what we do.

Not what some law code says, as the Jews did. The Jews followed a law, but they didn't obey God. They didn't follow the Lord, Yahweh.

They followed the law, in many cases, but they didn't love God. Remember, Jesus quotes Isaiah against the Jews of his time, saying, these people draw near me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Whereas, Paul tells the Galatians, no, it's following Jesus.

It's loving Jesus. It's being, you know, following the Lord. And if you go into Torah observance, that's not following the Lord.

That's replacing Christ with another authority. Now, that's what Galatians was doing. Now, Romans, it's a different thing.

You've already got people in the church, Jewish people, who've always been Torah observance and still are. And then there's Gentiles who are not. And we don't even know if the Jews in the church were trying to convince the Gentiles to get circumcised and all that.

We don't have any evidence that they were, but they just preferred to look down on them for not being circumcised. It seems like the Jews were not interested in making Gentiles become Torah observant, but they were interested in belittling Gentiles because they were unclean. They were not circumcised and so forth.

They'd accept them into the church. How could they not? Even the synagogues accepted uncircumcised people as third-rate citizens. By the way, I mentioned that there were the uncircumcised Gentiles who were God-fears, but there was also those Gentiles who would become circumcised.

They were called proselytes and they were treated as Jews. But the uncircumcised ones, like the Gentiles that are in Rome, they were frowned upon but accepted under the roof of the church, as it were. Now, it's a very different flavor between Galatians and Romans.

Romans is very measured, very sane, very methodical, very calm. Whereas Galatians is written in a fervor. Paul makes all kinds of statements like, if anyone preaches any other gospel, let him be accursed.

Or those who want to circumcise you, I wish they were castrated, which is what he actually does say in chapter 6 of Galatians. He talks about these people are trying to corrupt you. In other words, he's very strong in his statements against the Judaizers in Galatians.

But in Romans, he says, well, some of you want to keep these Jewish rules summed up. Let everyone be fully persuaded in his own mind. He's not coming against the Jews.

He's not coming against the Torah-observant people. He just says, yeah, just do what your conscience tells you. And I think the reason is, a number of reasons.

One, he had never been to Rome, so he didn't quite have the ownership of the church there to try to tell everyone what to do, like he did in Galatians. Galatians, he converted all those people. He was their father in the faith.

They were his children, as it were, and he felt that way toward them. He saw them in a crisis. Galatians were in a crisis.

The gospel was being compromised there, whereas in Rome, maybe not quite so much, just some adjustment of thinking needed to be done. And also, so we see that Romans is really the most impersonal letter Paul wrote, and Galatians, one of the most personal, most emotional. The only thing really personal in Romans is the list of people that Paul greets at the end of the book.

In chapter 16, there's about 27 friends of his that are in Rome that he must have met somewhere else in his travels or theirs or both, and he sends greetings to them. He knows them, but he's never been to their hometown, and they are now there, so he sends greetings. And that's the only thing that's actually personal in any way in the book of Romans.

It's actually the most impersonal of the letters. Now, there are two opinions about the purpose of the writing of Romans, and I said this at the beginning. One of these opinions comes largely from the Reformation.

Luther's commentary on Romans, I believe, is probably the source of this, at least almost all Protestants in their commentaries quote Luther and so forth on these things, and they follow a certain paradigm. The idea that many commenters seem to have is that since Paul was planning to come to Rome on his way to Spain, and since the people in Rome were unfamiliar with him and his preaching, he wanted to sort of send ahead something of a gospel tract to acquaint them with his teaching, sort of to prime them, so he like, when he preaches among them, nothing will surprise them. He's sending basically an explanation of the gospel he preached.

And so Romans is often looked at as not what we call an occasional letter. The word occasional doesn't mean it happened once in a while. It means it was occasioned by something.

Paul's letters, at least all of them other than Romans, are occasional documents. That means something in the church that Paul heard about occasioned his writing, usually a problem. A problem in the church of Galatia, a problem in the church of Thessalonica, a problem in Corinth, multiple problems in Corinth.

It's the problems in these churches that occasioned his writing to them, and therefore we

recognize all of Paul's other church epistles as occasional, that is occasioned by something. And many commenters have felt that Romans is not an occasional letter. It's sort of a timeless classic.

It's just like C.S. Lewis's Mere Christianity. It'll benefit anyone to read it any time. There's no special reason for it being written except to communicate Christian doctrine.

And therefore, Romans is seen as a highly organized and methodical Christian tract. On this view, Paul spends the first three chapters proving that we all need salvation by grace, through faith. He does this by first of all pointing out that everybody's a sinner.

According to this view, chapter 1, after he gets through his prologue, is largely devoted to showing that the Gentiles are sinners. Then in chapter 2, he devotes most of that chapter to pointing out that the Jews also are sinners. And in chapter 3, in verse 9, he says, so we have already shown that both Jews and Gentiles are under sin.

So, as if that's a summary of the first two chapters, and he has therefore proven that, as he says before the end of chapter 3, all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. So, the first step in arguing for the gospel is to prove that people are sinners. As I used to hear preachers say, when I was young, you're not going to get anyone to take the medicine if they don't know they're sick.

So he has to let them know what the sickness is. They're sinners and condemned. But, he also points out in the latter part of chapter 3 and moving on really through chapter 7, that the remedy for sin is not to be found in law, in keeping the law, and therefore in a works righteousness.

But it is to be found only in grace through faith in Christ. And he develops that thought then in chapters 4 through 7. And then chapter 8, kind of is an answer to chapter, to the end of chapter 7. At the end of chapter 7, Paul talks about how he's frustrated because he doesn't do the things he resolves to do. And the things he resolves not to do, he ends up doing them.

He says, oh wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from the body of this death. And Romans 8 is seen then as the answer to that. And Romans 8 is where we have strong emphasis on the Holy Spirit.

A subject that has only come up two or three times in the first seven chapters is found, I forget the number now, maybe a dozen times, something like that, in Romans 8, the Holy Spirit. It's the new emphasis that comes up in chapter 8 as the solution to the problem of, you know, wretched man that I am who will deliver me from the body of his death. In chapter 8, he mentions that the Holy Spirit enables us, empowers us, allows us to live a righteous life which the law could not do.

And enables us to also pray when we don't know what to pray for as we want, or as we

ought, I should say. And then at the end of chapter 8, he kind of ends with this almost kind of extended doxology kind of thing. Who shall separate us from the love of God? It's not really a doxology, but it's some kind of an inspirational passage, you know, nothing can separate us from the love of God.

All things work together for good to those who love God, who are the called according to his purpose, and so forth. And so that is seen as the closing of a major section of Romans. In the standard view of Romans, chapters 1 through 8 are a distinctive portion.

And then there's another distinctive portion, which is Romans 9 through 11. I have to say that many times this is presented almost as if it's an unrelated portion. It's like Paul has finished his gospel presentation in the first eight chapters, and then he kind of thinks of something else to talk about entirely different, and that is Israel.

And chapters 9 through 11 are the most extended passage in the New Testament about Israel. And Paul's addressing the question of why is it that God, who promised salvation to Israel, has brought salvation to the world, but Israel hasn't been part of it? Of course, they have a bit. There are some Jews like himself who have, but most Jews have not.

And most Jews were saying, how come? If this Messiah is Jesus, why didn't he do for Israel what the prophets suggested he would do? Save Israel, gather them back to the Holy Land. Why didn't he do these things? And so Paul spends Romans 9 through 11 answering that question. And I believe that traditionally people have given the wrong meaning to his answer, and we'll talk about that in a moment.

Once you get through chapter 11, he's finished talking about the Israel subject. We have definitely a distinctive section. Chapters 12, pretty much to the end of the book, actually since chapter 16 is largely comprised of greetings to people, and chapter 15, after a certain point, is largely talking about his travel plans and things like that.

The main subject matter of the book that he's trying to get across is found in chapters 12 through chapter 15, I don't know, verse 7 or so, somewhere around there. And that kind of ends his presentation, then he winds it down with closing statements, greetings, travel plans, and things like that. So the idea is, especially that Romans 1 through 8 is, you know, the gospel presentation more or less presented in a vacuum.

That is to say, not really addressing any particular defect in the Church of Rome, but just, you know, the kind of track that you might just hand out on the street anywhere of the gospel presentation. And in fact, that's why much evangelism has relied, personal evangelism has often relied on what they call the Romans Road. How many of you have heard of the Romans Road? Well, that refers to a simple presentation of the gospel based on the book of Romans.

And, you know, you start with Romans 3, 23, where he says, "...all have sinned and come

short of the glory of God." Well, okay, so everyone's a sinner. What's that mean? Well, Romans 6, 23 says, "...the wages of sin is death, that the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." So, okay, well, there's death there. And then Paul, in the later following chapters, talks about how the law can't save you.

And then you get finally to Romans 10 and verse 9, where he says, "...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus Christ is Lord, believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you'll be saved." And basically, through a string of verses moving through Romans, they've called it the Romans Road for an obvious reason, it presents what they consider the basic points of the presentation of the gospel as Paul gave it there. And so, again, Romans is often seen mainly as a gospel tract and not as an occasional letter like his, like Paul's other letters. Now, the other way that it can be seen, and I believe that that this is the correct way myself, is that it is, in fact, an occasional letter, like all of Paul's other letters.

He had a reason for wanting to write to the Romans. Yes, he was coming there, maybe he was writing just to send word ahead that, you know, this is what I'm coming, this is what you can expect. However, it's a pretty extensive argument just to send, you know, a note ahead, I'm coming, make ready for me.

I personally believe that as we look at it this way, realizing the stress that existed in the church of Rome because of the former absence of the Jewish element who had come back, and the tension that existed between those who thought that only by being Torah observant could you really be a good Christian, that would be the Jews in the church, and the strife between them and the Gentiles who thought, I'm not interested in Torah observance, thanks, I'll just follow Jesus. Well, that was causing problems. As, for example, you would find a problem probably if you, as a non-Sabbatarian, for example, would start attending maybe a Seventh-day Adventist church where they believe you have to keep the Sabbath on Saturday, and maybe you don't feel that way.

I'm not sure why you'd go there if you didn't feel that way, but you might have to if it was the only church in town. Like in New Testament times, there's only one real church in town. You couldn't choose a different church because you're different with someone about things like that.

So you could see how being thrust together in a fellowship with people who disagreed about such things could easily make for uncomfortable fellowship in some ways. And I believe that the evidence is very strong that what Paul is addressing is this problem, the problem that the Jews thought they were better than the Gentiles, not because they lived better, because Paul makes it very clear in chapter 2 there are Gentiles who live better than Jews. There are Gentiles who keep the righteous requirements of the law, and Jews who do not.

And the point to make here is that he's not just talking to individuals about the need to

live a righteous life and not to get into Torah observance. He's addressing a mentality that is known to exist among the Jews. It did in Old Testament times.

It does among some Jews today, and that is that we're the Jews. You can tell, I'm circumcised. I keep the Sabbath.

I don't eat pork or shellfish. I keep the Torah. That Torah was given to us and no one else, and the fact that we are of the race that has the Torah, that makes us God's special people.

Now these Gentiles who are uncircumcised who are coming to believe in Christ, well, okay, fine, let them be saved, I guess, but they aren't clean as we are. They're not on the same level as we are. We are better because we are Jewish, and by Jewish, it's not so much racially Jewish, although there's no distinction in those days between a racial Jew and an observant Jew.

The Jews as a race observed Judaism. Today that's not so. There are people who are Jewish today who don't feel any better than any Gentiles.

They don't think they're superior. They're Jewish by race, but they're not observant, and, you know, a very large percentage of the Jewish population of the earth's air are atheists, and many of them are Buddhists and other religions. So, I mean, to be a Jew by race today is a very different thing than to be a Jew by religion.

Sammy Davis Jr. was an African-American who converted to Judaism and died a Jew, but he wasn't born a Jew, and that's because he became a religious Jew but not an ethnic Jew. In biblical times, if you were an ethnic Jew, almost certainly you were a religious Jew. It was the pride of the Jew that they were not like the Gentiles.

They were not that lesser breed without the law, and therefore they had a smugness about them that was based not on really how well they lived but on the fact that they belonged to a religion and a people that had been chosen by God, where Gentiles did not. So, Paul, I believe he spends the first three chapters trying to make the point, and I think that's from chapter 1 on through chapter 3, making the point that being Jewish isn't what makes anyone better. Having the Torah doesn't make you better.

Now, if you keep the Torah, you'd be a better person, but not any better than a Gentile who keeps it. That is to say, the moral standards of the Torah. If you avoid murder and adultery and theft and covetousness, and you're Jewish, that's good.

That's good. God honors that, but he honors Gentiles who do that, too. The thing is, the Jew was not finding his identity in those days, generally speaking, by his moral superiority to Gentiles, though Jews, of course, assumed that, on balance, Jewish people would be far more moral than Gentiles, since Gentiles were pagans, and pagans had temple prostitutes and drunkenness, and they ate meat sacrificed to idols and

worshipped idols.

I mean, certainly, Gentiles were, in general, more immoral than Jews, in general, were. But what Paul points out is there are Jews, not all of them, certainly, but there are Jews who do the same bad things that Gentiles do, but they still think they're better than Gentiles because they're Jews and because they're circumcised. And there are Gentiles who are not circumcised, who don't do those bad things the pagans do, and he says, they, he's speaking to a Jew, he says, will they not condemn you? You who have the law and circumcision but don't keep it, won't they who are not circumcised and don't have the law who keep the law, meaning the Christian Gentiles, won't they condemn you? Doesn't their own life condemn you? And so, we're gonna have to see, I think, if we want to follow, and the evidence will be totally, I feel, persuasive.

Once you see that this is what Paul's going for, you see that every word he uses works toward that, making that point. But that is what I think we'll find going on in Romans in the structure of the argument and the purpose of his writing. Now, at this point, we're gonna take a break, maybe 10 minutes or so, and we'll come back and we'll just have an overview of the book of Romans.