

NEW TESTAMENT SURVEY ACTS & ROMANS

PREFACE

This is the second book in a series whereby we hope to survey the whole of the New Testament and also give some suggestions as to how we should preach from the individual books. In addition there is a chapter devoted to how we should preach from the epistles which has some obvious differences from the narrative sections of the Gospels and Acts. Again I am indebted to Roger Prime for the faithful work he has put in both recording a number of talks on these two books for the Serving Today radio programme for pastors and church leaders, and for agreeing that we put his material into the booklet form you now have in your hands.

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Part 1: The Book Of Acts

Chapter 1 - Introduction and Summary

In this chapter we are going to begin looking at the events that followed the resurrection of Jesus and his return to heaven at his ascension. They are recorded for us in the book of Acts.

Author and purpose

It is clear from reading the opening words of this book that it is written by the same author as Luke's Gospel, which was Luke himself. Acts begins, "*In my former book Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up into heaven.*" When we look at Luke's Gospel we discover that Luke wrote that book to this same man Theophilus (Luke 1:1-4). The author of both these books was a travelling companion of Paul on his missionary journeys. There are a number of passages in Acts where the author uses the plural 'we' indicating he himself was present at those times (see Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-21; 27:1-28:6). Luke intended Acts to be the continuation of the story of Jesus recorded in his Gospel. Whilst Jesus had returned to heaven, he sent the Holy Spirit from heaven to continue his work in the world as his Spirit works through the Apostles.

Luke has provided us with an accurate historical record of events in the early church, which in many ways forms an important bridge between the Gospels and the Epistles, which follows on in the New Testament. Without the historical explanation of how the gospel spread through the world of the Roman Empire we would know far less about the churches and individuals the letters are written to. Luke's record of Paul's missionary journeys in particular is vitally important in helping us piece together the events that form the background to the letters Paul wrote.

Now we need to remember that Luke did not set out to write a full history of the early church. Instead, he was quite selective in the events he recorded. For example, if we look at the list of people in Jerusalem for Pentecost in chapter 2 we see residents from countries like modern day Iraq and Iran, Egypt and parts of North Africa. Presumably some of them may have been among the 3000 converts that day, but there is no record of what happened when they returned home. In a similar way, we know from chapter 8 that the royal court official from Ethiopia – or what we believe is modern day Sudan – was converted and Luke records him returning home rejoicing in his new found faith. Yet there is no record of what happened down there in Sudan when he returned.

The key to understanding Luke's purpose is found in Jesus' words to the Apostles recorded in Acts 1v8 where he said to his disciples, *"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* Luke's purpose in writing, then, is to show that Christianity is not a faith confined to the Jewish nation centred in Jerusalem but rather the message is for people of all nations throughout the world.

Luke's method

To answer the question, 'How does Luke fulfil his purpose?' we simply need to read through the book because he traces the progress of Christianity from Jerusalem where it all began, to Rome, which was the hub

of the world empire. Whilst the book begins with the Apostles gathered in Jerusalem and preaching the message of Jesus there on the Day of Pentecost, the book ends with Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, in Rome. Although he was imprisoned under house arrest he had the freedom to preach the gospel to all who would come and hear, Jew and Gentile alike. By the end of the book the focal point of Christianity is the very capital of the Roman Empire that encompassed so much of the world of that day.

There are five key verses spread throughout Acts, which show us how Luke's purpose develops in the book. They are like large stepping-stones in a river to take us safely across the water, beginning with Jerusalem and ending at Rome. In them Luke seems to write a summary of the way the church was growing before a new major step forward was made in the spread of the gospel. The first of these is Acts 6v7 *"So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith."* Up to this point the gospel had not really spread outside of Jerusalem. All this was about to change as the good news of Jesus was taken to the Samaritans, and so Luke writes a summary of the growth of the church, before recording the next development. The rest of chapter 6 and chapters 7, record the arrest of Stephen, his trial and martyrdom for his faith. In chapters 8 and 9 we see the persecution that came to the church and the believers were scattered, taking the gospel out into Judea and Samaria. Saul of Tarsus, having been involved with this persecution, was converted on the road

to Damascus and called by God to be a missionary to the Gentiles. These are all major developments in the growth of the church. Before recording another step in the spread of the gospel we have a further summary verse, Acts 9v31, *“Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.”*

The ground is now prepared for another important step forward, namely, the preaching of the gospel to Gentiles. In chapter 10 Peter was led to preach to Cornelius and his household. Then news reaches the Jerusalem church in chapter 11 of the preaching of the gospel to Greeks in Antioch and the conversion of many to the Lord Jesus Christ. Barnabas was sent to encourage them in the faith and he drew Paul into the work. Antioch now becomes the focus for the spread of the Gospel as Paul and Barnabas were sent out to preach to the Gentile world. However, before this is recorded we have another summary verse in Acts 12v24, *“But the word of God continued to increase and spread.”*

Antioch was a big step forward in the northward progress of the Gospel from Jerusalem to Rome. The church there sent out Paul and Barnabas to take the Gospel west into Asia on their first missionary journey. The result was a number of churches established in what is now modern day Turkey. Then we come to the next of Luke’s summary verses in Acts 16v5 at the beginning of the second

missionary journey, *“So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.”*

Paul was now to cross over into Europe on his missionary journey and this was a vital step in reaching Rome with the gospel. Having established churches in Europe on his second missionary journey, Paul then returned to Ephesus on his third journey and continued his work of evangelism in both Turkey and Europe from there. Paul had, however, a final step in mind. After leaving Ephesus he intended to go to Rome itself and preach the gospel there, but before recording the events that bring Paul to Rome, Luke wrote another of his summary verses. It is Acts 19v20, *“In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.”*

On leaving Ephesus Paul returned to Jerusalem and then intended going to preach the gospel in Rome. The following chapters record his arrest at Jerusalem and eventual journey to Rome as a prisoner. Even though he did not expect to get to Rome in this way, the Lord took him there and gave him the freedom to preach the gospel even though he was a prisoner. So Luke ends his account of those early events in the life of the church, showing how the gospel spread from Jerusalem to Rome and Paul preached a message of good news for people of all nations at the very heart of the empire.

Chapter 2 - The Main Themes In Acts

There are three main themes in the book that are introduced to us in chapter 1. The first is the promised coming of the Holy Spirit, the third is the importance of prayer as the disciples wait for the coming of the Spirit, and the second is the disciples' responsibility to be the Lord's witnesses in the world.

The promised Holy Spirit

In chapter 1 Jesus tells the apostles that they were to be his witnesses in all the world, a task that must have seemed enormous to this small band of believers. How were they going to be able even to begin such a task? The answer lay in the precious promise Jesus gave them. They would receive the power to do this when the Holy Spirit came to them from heaven (Acts 1:8). When the Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) we immediately see the apostles given the power to preach the Gospel and many people were converted that day. From that beginning at Pentecost Luke records the amazing growth and development of the early church which was all as a result of God being at work by his Spirit. Luke does not hide the difficulties being experienced by the early believers but shows through the working of the Holy Spirit the gospel continued to spread because God is building his church.

For example, in chapter 4 Peter and John had been imprisoned by the Jewish religious leaders and forbidden to preach about Jesus. When they returned to the rest of the church and prayed about this situation, the Holy Spirit filled them so that, despite the threats, they had power to

speaking the Word of God boldly. Then in chapter 13 the Holy Spirit led the church at Antioch to send out Paul and Barnabas as missionaries. In chapter 16, on Paul's second missionary journey, the Holy Spirit prevented the apostle from going into certain parts of Asia to preach, but then opened the way for Paul to cross over into Europe to take the good news of Jesus to Macedonia and on into Greece.

The Holy Spirit was at work in a number of other ways in the early church. We see his concern for the purity of the church. In chapter 5 when both Ananias and Sapphira lied to the apostles about some land they had sold, they were struck down dead for lying against and tempting the Holy Spirit. We also find him described as comforting the church in chapter 9v31; a work Jesus had promised the Spirit would come to do. Then in chapter 15 he is seen guiding the church in their discussions over the issue of whether Gentile believers should be circumcised. The lesson for us today from this is that we too must depend on the Holy Spirit in our work of preaching and teaching the good news of Jesus.

It is very significant that Luke regularly records a link between the disciples praying and the Holy Spirit filling them with power. This is a vital lesson because in prayer the church expresses its dependence on the Lord for his power to be his witnesses in the world. This leads us to the next of Luke's main themes.

The importance of prayer

In chapter 1 when Jesus told the apostles to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit to come, they spent 10 days together praying. Acts 2 shows us that the Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost in answer to their prayers. We see that same connection in chapter 4, when the apostles were filled again with the Holy Spirit once more in answer to their prayers. This emphasis on the importance of prayer continues through the rest of the book. Indeed, there is reference to the church or individual believers praying in many of the chapters and this shows the spirit of dependence on the Lord in the early church. This is an important lesson for us to remember still today. If the frequent references to the Holy Spirit tell us that God was doing his work, the many references to prayer show that the church was expressing their dependence on the Lord to do his work.

An example is found in Acts 10. It was while Peter was praying that he had the vision of the clean and unclean animals through which God prepared him to understand that he must preach the good news of Jesus to Gentiles. While Peter was still praying the visitors from the Roman centurion Cornelius arrived and he was told by the Spirit to go with them to preach about Jesus. Also in chapter 13, while the church at Antioch was praying, the Spirit told them to set Paul and Barnabas apart for the missionary work he was calling them to. So we can see clearly that it was the Holy Spirit who was in control of the growth and development of the early church as the gospel spread, and

alongside that the church expressed its dependence on the Lord in prayer.

Being witnesses for Christ

The witness of the apostles and the early church is a very important theme in Acts. It starts, of course, with the preaching of the apostles in chapter 2 on the day of Pentecost, but can also be seen in chapter 3 as Peter and John preached Jesus to the crowd who gathered after the healing of the lame man. The theme continues in chapters 4 and 5 when first Peter and John, then all the apostles refused to be silenced by the threats of the Jewish council. Also there is Stephen's witness before the Jewish council in chapter 7, and in chapter 8 we see ordinary believers scattered through the persecution spreading the message of Jesus wherever they went.

Luke highlights the importance of this witness in the summaries he has written about the sermons that were preached by Peter and Paul. These sermons give us an insight into the message that was being proclaimed by the apostles. They help us to see the way they understood Jesus' life and death and how he fulfilled the Old Testament Scriptures. We also learn from these messages that the approach used towards Jews was different from that used towards Gentiles. When Paul preached in a synagogue in chapter 13 he made frequent references to the Old Testament Scriptures, but when he preached in Athens to the Greeks in Acts 17 Paul used their devotion to many idols as the starting point to preach to them the message of

the one true God. This brings before us a very useful lesson to apply today in our preaching. We need to begin where people are and bring them from that starting point to the Lord Jesus.

In John's Gospel we notice that the miracles of Jesus were described by John as signs that pointed to who Jesus was and the truth of his message. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 12v12 that in the same way the miracles in the early church were given by God as signs that the message of the apostles was true. We read, "*The things that mark an apostle – signs, wonders and miracles – were done among you.*" We need to recognise that God gave these miracles as signs to be performed through the apostles and those closely associated with them to demonstrate the truth of the message they preached. They had a very specific purpose to fulfil in the days of the apostles, but we must be careful about expecting such miracles still to be performed today. This does not mean that God is no longer able to perform miracles, but it helps us to realise that at the special time recorded in Acts and the spread of the gospel in the world recorded there the Lord gave the authenticating signs to the apostles for that particular period in the history of the Church and which only applied to that time.

Chapter 3 - Understanding And Preaching Acts

A general principle

It is very important that we have a proper understanding of Acts, because only then will we know how to teach and

preach from the book. The first question we must ask ourselves is, 'What was Luke's purpose in writing Acts?' We have already seen what we might call 'the big picture' that Luke had in mind as he wrote, namely, to record the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome. We can add that he was also concerned to show that it was not a threat to the empire. Throughout Acts the opposition to the gospel did not come from the Roman authorities. In almost every case it came from Jews and their religious leaders. Acts is, therefore, a historical book telling us events in the early church as they actually happened.

A common mistake to make is to think that Luke intended to give to us a model of church life for us to copy today. Really that was not Luke's intention at all. The problem is that so many people approach the book of Acts and say we need to get back to what it was like in the early church. They take what can be called 'restorationist' view. They say, 'If we want to know God's blessing today we must restore things to how they were in the book of Acts.' That is not how we should understand Acts. For example, in chapters 2 and 4 we have the record of the way the believers in Jerusalem sold their possessions and gave the money so that it could be used to care for those who were in need. What we see there is a principle that we should care for one another in the church, but **not** that we have to copy the early church in every Christian believer selling all our possessions in order to do this. We can also use another illustration. Luke records four specific instances when the Holy Spirit came on groups of believers and on three of

those four occasions he records specific signs that accompanied this event. These were unique and significant developments in the work and Luke is telling us that this is what happened on those occasions and not that this is a pattern you should expect to happen when the Holy Spirit comes into a believer's life. A good phrase to keep in our minds as we read through is 'Acts is a record but not necessarily a rule.' Luke tells us exactly what happened but that does not mean the same thing must happen today. This will help us immensely. We can add a further point to this general rule and it is that if something is binding on all believers then it will be specifically commanded elsewhere in Scripture, and in particular in the other books of the New Testament.

To help us understand this we shall look at the example of the coming of the Holy Spirit. The Day of Pentecost, which is recorded in Acts 2, describes that historic event. The coming of the Spirit was in fulfilment of Jesus' promise to his apostles. This was a unique event which cannot be repeated in the same form. In chapter 8 the gospel was preached to the Samaritans for the first time and the Lord withheld the Spirit from those who believed until the apostles arrived to demonstrate that this major step forward had the approval of the apostles. In chapter 10 when Peter preached to Cornelius and his family and they believed in Christ, the coming of the Spirit was accompanied by the believers speaking in other languages, as on the Day of Pentecost. This was a sign of the acceptance of the Gentiles into the church. Then in Acts 19

Paul meets disciples of John the Baptist. He teaches them about the coming of Christ, they believe and are baptised in the name of Jesus. The Holy Spirit comes on them with signs of languages and prophecy. In many ways, as disciples of John the Baptist, these were the last of the believers under the old covenant who have now come to faith in Jesus. There is something unique about each of these experiences and we must be careful we do not use these events as though they are the normal experience of the coming of the Spirit into the believer's life.

Understanding so as to preach

We should understand the events recorded in Acts against the background of the teaching that's given in the epistles. Both the doctrine and practice of the church are set out in great detail in the New Testament letters and they form the foundation for the church still today. We must be very careful that we do not build a doctrine or practice solely on events that happened in Acts. Luke is telling us there what happened, he did not intend we should use these events as a model for church life today. We can learn from the events recorded in Acts and interpret those events for ourselves today in the light of the teaching given in the epistles. For example, at the end of Acts 2 it would seem that the early believers met together every day to remember Jesus' death for them in the Lord's supper. Luke is telling us there what they did; he is not saying we must all meet every day to celebrate the Lord's Supper. From the rest of the New Testament we see the importance of meeting regularly to

remember Jesus' death for us in this way, but we are not told how often we should do this.

We see that in the New Testament letters the experiences of Israel were used as examples for believers to learn from. The events may serve as warnings or they may be an encouragement to strengthen us in our faith. In a similar way, we can learn from the experiences of the early church recorded in Acts and there may be lessons here, which can be either a warning or encouragement to us. What we must not do is assume that exactly the same things will happen to us as happened to the believers in the early church, nor that God expects us to do exactly the same things as they did.

It will help us greatly if we ask some very basic questions about the passage in Acts we are studying and are going to teach to our churches. First, we can ask the question, 'what does this passage tell us about God?' Since Acts is history, a record of events that actually took place, what does this passage show us about the character of God and his sovereignty in working out his plan of salvation? Then we can ask ourselves, what does this passage tell us about people in relationship to God and to others? A third question we should ask is, 'Are there situations that we face where the principles of this passage might be applied?' And then fourthly, 'what response should we make to what God is saying to us in this passage?' If we understand Luke's purpose in writing this book and do not use it as an exact model for us to copy in church life today,

these four principles will be a great help to us in preaching and teaching from the book of Acts.

Part 2: The Epistles

Chapter 4 - Teaching the Epistles

It has helpfully been stated that the book of Acts is a good bridge between the four Gospels and the Epistles. Before we look at these epistles, and in particular in this volume, the book of Romans, we need to think about the way we approach preaching from the Epistles. As with all of the types of literature we find in the Bible we need to approach this portion in the Word of God in the right way.

The first thing to note is quite easy. Remember that this is a letter, written by a real person to either a group of people in a local church or churches or written to an individual. If you wrote to someone you would want him or her to read the whole letter so they clearly understood what you had to say. In the same way, if we are going to understand the message of an epistle correctly we must treat the letter as a whole and read it all the way through before we begin to teach from it.

The next thing to note is the structure of each epistle or letter. Like any letter we write' it will usually have a greeting at the beginning, which will tell us who it is addressed to. This is often followed by a prayer or thanksgiving for them before the main reason for writing is introduced. This will usually be followed by some

instructions or exhortations, which help the readers to see the way the truths taught in the letter, are to be applied before the letter is closed with a final greeting.

We can illustrate this from Paul's letter to the Colossians because it is quite typical of the way Paul wrote. In chapter 1 we have a greeting in v1-2 followed by Paul's thanksgiving and prayer for them in verses 3-14. From chapter 1v15 to the end of chapter 2 Paul deals with his main reason for writing. Then from chapter 3v1 to 4v6 we have instructions and exhortations as Paul applies his teaching to the lives of his readers. Finally we have the closing greetings in chapter 4v7-18.

Having read the epistle through and tried to discover its structure, the next thing that will help us greatly in teaching the message is to do all we can to discover who the first readers were and what contact the writer of the letter had with them. This is where the book of Acts is so important when we come to the letters of Paul, because we can often discover something about the churches or individuals concerned and Paul's relationship with them from what Luke has recorded in Acts. That background will be very important in helping to understand the letter.

Having done that, we now need to find out the reason the letter was written. In the case of Paul's letters we find that sometimes one of his fellow workers has brought him news of the church and he writes in response to that, as he does with the letters to Thessalonica and Colossi. At other times

the church may have asked Paul certain questions they needed help with, as the Corinthian church did. Or, as with the Galatian churches, Paul becomes aware that false teachers are influencing the churches into believing that circumcision is necessary for salvation. What we must always bear in mind is that these are real letters written to real people about real issues and problems that they faced. So before we can begin to apply the message to ourselves today we must do all we can to make sure we have understood the message of the letter for its original readers. This will be an immense help in determining what the main theme of the letter is. Whilst the letter may appear to cover a number of issues, we need to get hold of the main theme and try to discover the big idea that the writer wants to get over. That is the big picture we should always keep in mind as we teach from the letter. This is important because few of us are likely to be preaching or teaching a whole epistle in one sermon. We are more likely to be dealing with just a part of the letter or even an individual verse. That must not be taken out of context but always seen in the context of the whole message of the letter. If we keep the big picture of the book in mind we must always be asking ourselves where this passage fits in with the bigger picture.

There are a number of things that will help us to keep a particular passage we are preaching from in context. We can ask ourselves certain questions that make sure we keep our passage or text in the flow of the whole letter. We can firstly ask 'Why does the writer say this here?' or, 'How does this particular verse or passage fit in with the theme of

the letter at this point?' Once we have answered that we can ask secondly, 'Why does he say it now?' 'Why is this statement made now – does it illustrate or add to a point that's just been made – does it move the line of thought or argument on at this point?' We can then ask questions such as, 'What does it add to the overall message?' 'Where does it fit into the big picture of the whole epistle?' That will set the particular passage in the context of the whole letter. Lastly we can ask, 'Why did the original readers need to know this?' We need to understand the relevance of what is being said to the first readers of the letter. All of these things will help us to be clear in our understanding and teaching of the passage.

The example of Colossians

We will illustrate this with the letter to the Colossian believers which we referred to earlier in this chapter. If we turn to Colossians chapter 2v6 Paul says there, "*So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith.*" Paul says this here because he has just been teaching the believers that Christ is all they need for living the Christian life now and having the hope of glory. He says it now because he is about to warn them of the dangers of the false teachers who were saying Christ was not sufficient and that they needed to depend on human wisdom and religious traditions to be complete Christians. This fits with the overall theme of the letter which is to counter the arguments of these false teachers and show the believers that in Christ they can be built up and

strengthened to live the Christian life. The original readers needed to know this so that they would not be led astray by the false teachers.

Applying the teaching

There are four simple steps we need to take:

1. Be clear about the original meaning of the passage.
2. Identify the main truth or principle that is being taught.
3. See how the principle can be applied to a similar situation today.
4. See if the application you are making is confirmed from the rest of Scripture.

Again we can illustrate this from Colossians. In chapter 3v22-25 Paul gives instructions to slaves concerning the way they are to live out their faith in working for their masters. Few of us will have modern day slaves in our congregations today, yet the principles can be worked out by any believer in their daily employment. Be respectful to your employer, be honest and hard working, even when you are not being watched because your true master is the Lord and not men. We are to be faithful at work because we are serving Christ. We look to him and not men for the ultimate reward.

We are now in a position to look at the first of Paul's epistles that we find in our Bibles, the letter to the Romans.

Part 3: Romans

Chapter 5 – Introduction

Author and time of writing

The author is identified in the very first verse of chapter 1, *“Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God...”* Romans is probably the most important of Paul’s letters, as it records for us a clear statement of the doctrine of salvation as well as some very practical teaching on the way the believer’s salvation affects the way we live in the world.

Now although Romans is the first of Paul’s letters which we come to in our Bibles, it was not the first one that he wrote. The order of the letters of Paul in the New Testament is not based on the date on which they were written but rather on the length of the letter. Romans is the longest of Paul’s letters and so comes first, the last one, coming immediately before Hebrews, is the shortest, the letter to Philemon. (Note: We are treating Hebrews separately as the name of the author is not mentioned anywhere in that book.) If we want to understand the order in which Paul wrote his letters we need to compare them with the events of his missionary journeys recorded for us in Acts and that will help us get a clearer picture of when they were written. We will try to do this as we look at them together.

It seems that Romans was written towards the end of Paul’s third missionary journey. Having spent between two and three years at Ephesus, Paul spoke about his plans for the

future in Acts 19:21, *“After all this had happened, Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia (Greece). ‘After I have been there,’ he said, ‘I must visit Rome also.’”* At the beginning of Acts 20 we see Paul leaving Ephesus and going firstly to Macedonia and then to Greece, where he spent three months before leaving for Jerusalem. We believe it was during those three months in Greece that Paul wrote his letter to the Romans from the city of Corinth. In the greetings he sends to the church recorded in Romans chapter 16 there is reference to Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea. This was the seaport of Corinth. There is also reference to Gaius (Rom 16:23 see also 1 Cor 1:14), and Erastus, both of whom probably lived in the city of Corinth.

In Acts 19:21 quoted in the last paragraph we noticed that Paul planned to go to Rome after he had visited Jerusalem, and in the first chapter of Romans he also writes about his plans to visit them. Later in Romans 15 he explained that his visit was planned after he had taken the gifts he had collected from the churches in Macedonia and Greece to Jerusalem. He expected to face trouble in Jerusalem from unbelieving Jews and asked them to pray he would arrive safely in Rome. All of this fits in with what we see in Acts 20 and the events that followed. Paul did eventually arrive in Rome after his visit to Jerusalem, but as a prisoner and not in the way he expected. His letter would have arrived earlier from Corinth to prepare for his visit.

The origin of the church

We have to say we have very little information as to exactly how the church began in Rome. What we do know is that when Paul wrote his letter around 56 AD that the church had probably been in existence for some time, as Paul refers in Romans 1 to the fact that he had planned to visit them many times but had been prevented from doing so. We do know from Acts chapter 2 that on the Day of Pentecost among the crowds in Jerusalem who heard Peter's sermon, there were visitors from Rome. It is likely that some of these visitors were converted and when they returned to Rome after Pentecost they took the message of Jesus with them, and the church was formed in Rome from these early converts and those who heard their message and believed.

It is likely the church was a mixture of Jewish believers and Gentile converts. The reference in Acts 2:11 tells us the visitors from Rome at Pentecost were both Jews and converts to Judaism. If there were believers in Christ from among them who formed the early church in Rome it would have been a mixed congregation of Jews and Gentiles. Since, however, Rome was a Gentile city, it is likely that whilst there were still Jewish believers there, the church became mainly made up of Gentile believers. The way Paul writes in Romans chapters 9 to 11 certainly suggests his readers were mainly Gentile converts. Paul also states in the letter on several occasions that he is called to be an apostle to the Gentiles, and this fits in with his

ambition to visit the church in Rome and preach the gospel there.

Purpose of writing

Unlike some of Paul's other letters where his purpose in writing is clearly stated or becomes obvious from the content of the letter, it is not quite so clear exactly why Paul wrote this letter. The fact that he makes references at the beginning and end of the letter to his plans to visit them suggests that in part the letter was to prepare the way for this visit. He also mentions in chapter 15 his plans to go on from them to Spain to preach the gospel and wants their support in this. These facts were certainly very much in his mind as he wrote.

We read in Romans 1:16 that Paul declared: *"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes; first for the Jew and then the Gentile."* This is a very significant verse. Paul sees his visit to Rome and perhaps beyond them to Spain as a new harvest field for the gospel and he takes the opportunity in this letter to set out clearly the truth of the gospel that he preaches. In many ways this letter contains the clearest and fullest statement in Scripture of the gospel of justification by faith. As Paul anticipates going to Rome he wants to set before his readers this clear explanation of this truth that is at the heart of the gospel.

Paul obviously knew the great importance of this church, as Rome was the capital of the empire. In his missionary

journeys Paul always seemed to concentrate on the key cities, which would be visited by travellers. Paul's burden was as they heard the gospel there and were converted; they would then take the gospel away with them. He clearly saw that the church in Rome would be the key to the gospel spreading further throughout the Roman Empire, especially further west into Europe where he had not yet been able to preach. It would seem that he wanted to give to this key church this clear statement of the gospel to ensure it was well established in the truth. There is also a hint in chapter 15 that Paul knows trouble awaits him in Jerusalem before he sets out for Rome, and if his plans are changed and he does not get there, he wants to make sure they have this clear teaching on the truth of the gospel.

Since the church at Rome was mainly Gentile, chapters 9 to 11 explain how God's purposes in blessing the Gentiles through the gospel fits in with God's overall purpose revealed in the Old Testament Scriptures. Also the closing chapters from 12 to 15 show how the truth of the gospel must be put into practice in everyday living. These may well have been important issues these believers in Rome were struggling with.

Chapter 6 - The Message Of The Book

Paul tells us in chapter 1 and verse 17 *"in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last."* This is the message of the opening chapters of the book. Here Paul shows us that there is only one way by which anyone can ever be

righteous in God's sight. It's a righteousness that comes from God and not through our human efforts, a righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus.

All have sinned

In chapter 1, after introducing this message in verses 16-17, Paul shows that it is a message needed by everyone because we are all guilty of sinning against God. In the second half of chapter 1 Paul shows how the ungodly, who appear to have little knowledge of God, are still aware of his existence through what they see and know in the world God made. Despite this they deliberately sin against God in all sorts of evil ways and they are under the wrath and judgement of God. Paul begins chapter 2 by showing how even the morally good are guilty before God, because when they pass judgement on the evil deeds of others they condemn themselves for breaking the very same law of God, not realising that in his kindness and patience God wants them also to repent of their sin. Indeed, at the end of chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3 Paul writes about the Jew, who by his attempts to keep God's law and observe the religious duty of circumcision, believes that he makes himself right with God. Paul shows that he is just as guilty of sin before God. In writing in this way Paul shows that all religious people who think that by their religious duties they are earning God's favour, are still sinners in God's sight. They can never earn salvation from God by what they do.

This is all summed up in the words of Romans 3:23 “*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” This is the conclusion of all that Paul has been saying in these opening chapters – that all of mankind has sinned against God – none of us can achieve righteousness through what we do.

Justification by faith in Christ

However, having painted a very dark yet realistic picture of mankind, Paul then introduces the great message that God has provided a way in which we can be righteous with God. This is not through our own efforts to keep his laws, but through faith in Jesus. At the end of chapter 3 Paul shows how God gave his own Son Jesus to die on the cross. Although he was perfect and sinless, he died to pay the penalty for sin so that God’s justice and wrath against sin might be satisfied and sinners could be forgiven and made righteous in God’s sight through faith in Jesus.

In the verses at the end of chapter 3 Paul shows that this message does not cancel out the Old Testament law. Rather it is through the law we become conscious of sin and see our need of Christ. Then in chapter 4 Paul illustrates from the life of Abraham that he was accepted as righteous in the sight of God on account of his faith in the promises of God and not because of anything he did. The true children of Abraham are those who believe God as he did. He is an example to us still today that righteousness with God comes through faith in God’s power to do what he has promised, and we must believe in Jesus as the one

who died for our sins and was raised to life so that we might be made righteous before God.

The fruits of justification

In Romans 5 Paul shows that believers are absolutely secure in our standing before God. If when we were sinners God reconciled us to himself, now that we are at peace with him we can be sure of his love and grace, even through the trials of life. Paul also shows that whilst through Adam sin and death came into the world and passes to all men as descendants of Adam, those who are joined to Christ by faith are no longer condemned and receive the gift of life from God.

Three mysteries

Being justified by faith does not mean that when someone believes in Jesus all the difficulties of this life will be over. We see in chapters 6, 7 and 8 that Paul deals with three great mysteries that face us as Christians and shows how our faith needs to be worked out in these situations. In chapter 6 the mystery is that whilst Christ has set us free from sin, yet still we sin. Paul shows here that whilst Christ has broken the power that sin holds over the life of the believer, we still have to struggle with our old sinful nature. We must not let it become our master again. Jesus is our master now and we must look to him for the grace and strength to live a righteous life.

The second mystery is dealt with in Romans 7. In that chapter Paul deals with the issue that whilst Jesus has set

us free from condemnation under the Old Testament law, yet even now as believers we still feel condemned. Paul writes from his own experience of the struggle every believer faces between the old nature of sin and the new nature that tries to live to please God. Paul feels the condemnation we all feel when we fall into sin but rejoices in the truth that Christ has set us free from the condemnation of the law. That is a really wonderful comfort to us in our Christian lives, to know we will never be condemned because Jesus has died for us.

The third mystery Paul deals with in chapter 8, which is that although as believers we are set free from death we still have to die. Here Paul shows that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the believer can know victory over sin. Nevertheless our bodies are still subject to the consequences of sin. We will suffer trials and difficulties in this life and eventually our bodies will die because we are still part of a fallen creation. However, our inheritance of eternal life is certain and nothing will ever separate us from God's love or rob us of our eternal salvation.

Teaching on Israel

At first sight it might seem that the theme of chapters 9 to 11 are almost unrelated to what has gone before. In actual fact they are not unrelated at all because in them Paul shows from God's dealings with Israel in history that he has acted on the principle of faith rather than works. He shows in chapter 9 that God's acceptance of a faithful remnant in Israel was based not on works but on his mercy.

In chapter 10 he contrasts the righteousness Israel tried to achieve through their own efforts, with the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ. And in chapter 11 he shows how the inclusion of the Gentiles in God's purposes is based on their faith in God's grace and mercy and not their own efforts. This is why Paul closes chapter 11 with that wonderful doxology praising the wisdom of God in such a gracious plan of salvation.

Practical application.

In the concluding chapters Paul shows how the great truths of the Christian faith should affect the way we live our lives as believers. Chapter 12 deals with the believer's personal devotion to the Lord and his relationships with others, both in the church and the world. Chapter 13 deals with living out our faith in relation to human governments and as a witness to the unbelieving world. Then in chapter 14 and the beginning of chapter 15 Paul lays down principles for living out our faith in matters of individual conscience.

He then finishes by referring to his plans to visit them, sending personal greetings to the believers in the church and a warning against false teachers.

Chapter 7 - Preaching From Romans

The message of this book is so important and exciting that we will all want to use it in our ministry and in this chapter we are going to explore ways of doing that. Now throughout this book there are some very well known

verses which many of us will know off by heart, and want to preach on. However, the danger of preaching on isolated verses is that we may ignore the context in which they occur and then not give the true sense of the passage. One of the first principles in preaching and teaching the Word of God is that we need to keep verses in their context and understand the message of the whole passage and not just one isolated verse. For this reason we need to preach our way systematically through a book or letter so that we understand the teaching of the whole book and not just isolated verses.

Having said that, Romans is a very long book and so the thought of preaching right through the whole book can be quite daunting. The way around this is to divide the book up into a number of shorter series and preach our way through it in that way. For example, we could do a series of sermons based on the first three chapters of the book showing the guilt of all men before God. In those chapters Paul writes about the guilt of the ungodly in chapter 1, he shows how the morally good and self-righteous are also guilty in chapter 2 and in chapter 3 shows how even the religious, like the Jews, are equally guilty before God. That brings us to the very famous verse in 3v23, *“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* It is in a sense Paul’s summing up of all he has said in the previous chapters. Having reached that conclusion Paul then shows how God has met the need of guilty sinners by offering Jesus as the sacrifice to take the punishment for sin and provide a way of salvation.

Another helpful series could be on justification by faith, starting with the closing verses of chapter 3 where we see that faith is the only way of justification for Jew and Gentile alike. Then into chapter 4, showing this is not in conflict with the Old Testament as Paul demonstrates justification by faith from the life of Abraham. We could then go on into chapter 5 showing the benefits for the believer of being justified through faith in Christ.

In our last chapter we said that chapters 6, 7 and 8 dealt with three great mysteries that puzzle us as believers. These would make an excellent series of messages. Many believers find it hard to understand that being saved does not mean there will be no struggles and conflict in the Christian life. To do a series on these three chapters would show how chapter 6 teaches that whilst Christ has set us free from sin, we still fall into sin and must seek to put to death the old nature so it does not become our master. Many believers struggle with guilt and feel condemned and a message from chapter 7 showing how Christ saves us from the condemnation of the law will be very comforting. Then a message from chapter 8 would show that whilst we are set free from death, our bodies are still subject to the consequences of sin and will eventually die, yet not even death can rob us of our hope in Jesus and he will raise our bodies when he returns.

Indeed, chapter 8 is such a wonderful chapter with so much important and comforting teaching in it that it is ideal for a

short series of messages. The opening 8 verses contrast a life lived according to the sinful nature with one lived by the Spirit of God. Then from verse 9 Paul shows that those who live by the Spirit are the sons of God and writes about the blessings enjoyed as God's sons. From verse 18 onwards Paul helps us understand how the sufferings we experience are inevitable because we live in a fallen world that is awaiting its renewal at Christ's return and how the Spirit helps us in our praying through the difficult experiences. The closing part of the chapter from verse 28 shows how God works for the good in the lives of his chosen people to make us like Christ and that we are secure in God's care because nothing in all of creation can ever separate us from his love.

Chapters 9 to 11 could be dealt with in a series, showing how the principle of justification by faith has been worked out by God in history, firstly in his dealings with his people Israel and then in the inclusion of the Gentiles in the kingdom of God.

From chapter 12 onwards Paul deals with practical application of how our faith in Christ should affect the way we live as believers. Again, these passages would make an ideal series, showing how faith is lived out in personal devotion, in relationships with fellow believers and with the world, and how it affects the decisions we make in matters of individual conscience.

A sermon example

Chapter 8 - Introduction

Let us suppose you want to preach a message on the theme of peace. We live in a world where people seem to lack any sense of peace in life, whether this is caused by war, acts of terrorism, natural disasters or tragedy in their personal experience of life. By way of introduction we might speak of the lack of peace in the world. Sin has created enmity between God and men and because we are not at peace with God we will never have peace in the world. We might also comment on Jesus' promise to his disciples from John 14v26 that he promises peace of heart and mind to those who trust in him.

1) Peace with God.

From this introduction we could turn to the verse in Romans 5v1, *"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."* We would need to start by looking back to the end of chapter 4, where Paul explains what Jesus has done to give us peace with God. He has paid the price for sin in his death and his resurrection is the guarantee that God has accepted the sacrifice Jesus has made in the place of sinners. We can be forgiven and declared righteous in God's sight on the basis of what Christ has done. This gift of peace with God needs to be accepted by faith, because Paul goes on to say – *'therefore'* – that is on the basis of what Jesus has done – since we have been justified by faith, *'we have peace with God.'* Peace with God comes

through our personal faith in Jesus as the one who died to make us righteous in God's sight.

2) The Peace of God

Here we could explain what it is like to experience the peace of God as a believer. In verses Romans 5: 2-5 Paul shows that being a believer in Christ and at peace with God does not mean that we will not have to face trials and difficulties in life. Instead, we know God's grace that uses the trials to develop perseverance and Christian character and assure us of the wonderful hope we have of being in glory with the Lord one day. In verses 6-8 Paul assures us that if God did that for us while we were his enemies, how much more certain we can be, now that we are at peace with God, that we will be saved from the coming wrath of God against sin and enter into eternal life. That is a tremendous source of peace to the believer.

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