

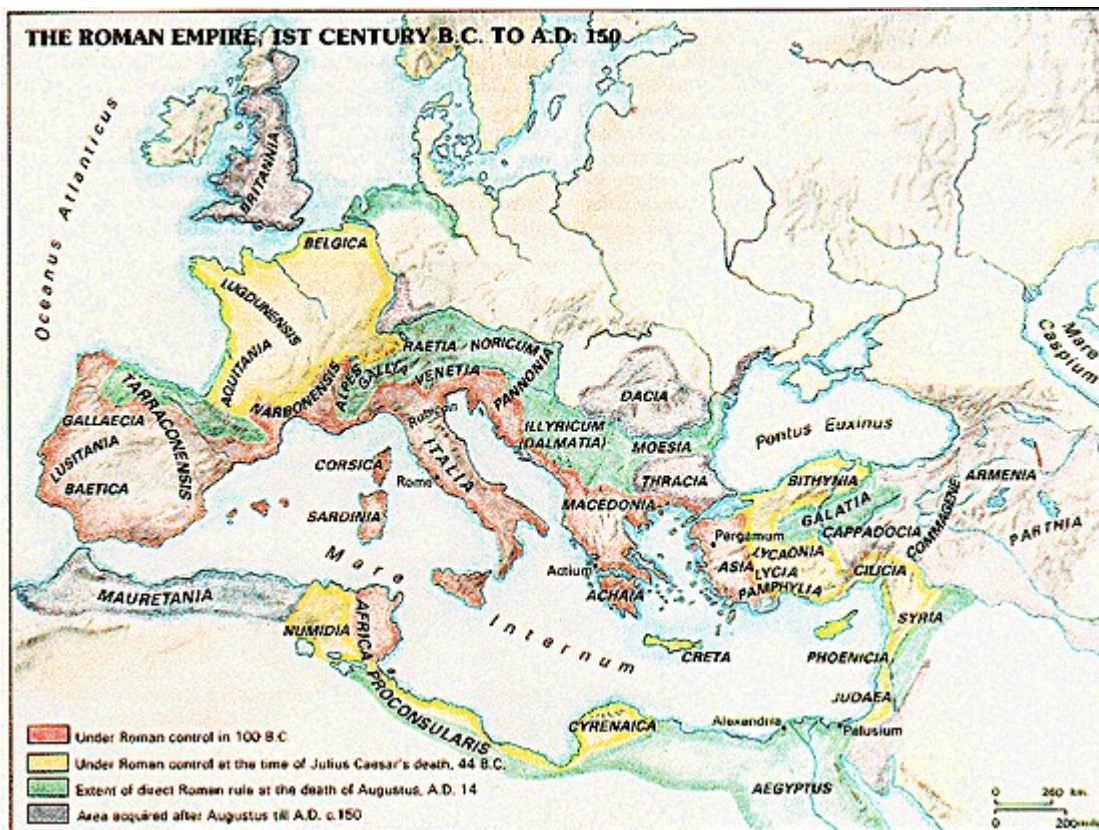
Romans 1:1-15 What matters most to you?

Introduction

On 24 May 1738 a discouraged Anglican missionary to North America went with a great deal of reluctance to a Bible study and prayer meeting in London. It would be a meeting that would be significant for the rest of his life. He wrote in his journal: ‘About a quarter before nine, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.’ I am sure a significant number of you will know exactly whose testimony I am reciting with these words, none other than the great Methodist preacher John Wesley. In the context of the evening someone had been reading the preface to Martin Luther’s commentary on the Letter to the Romans. This was not intended to be an evangelistic tool, as the meeting was a gathering to encourage Christians in their faith, yet here was an enthusiastic and highly disciplined Anglican clergyman who had never been told of the need to place his faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour. A few months before that date, another revealing journal entry contained these words: ‘I went to America to convert the Indians; but Oh! Who shall convert me?’ Praise God, that night in the fellowship meeting in Aldersgate Street in London the Holy Spirit used the teaching of this New Testament letter, as explained by a man converted through his own studies in Romans chapter one (Martin Luther). This extraordinary letter by the apostle Paul, much longer than the conventional letters of his day has been used to transform the lives of countless Christians over the centuries. I trust that as we go through it that our own lives will be impacted by its wonderful teaching.

1. The context of this letter (Romans 15:23-33)

(a) **Paul had always wanted to visit this church** (Romans 15:23) *But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to visit you,* However, he was always conscious of the shortness of time and that his priority was visiting major cities in the Roman Empire to establish churches where no earlier Christian missionary had gone. This point Paul made clear in Romans 15:19b-20: *So from Jerusalem all the way round to Illyricum, I have **fully proclaimed** the gospel of Christ. ²⁰ It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation.* How large is this geographical area? If it is grasped that Illyricum corresponds roughly to modern Albania, then he is saying that over this extremely large area corresponding to the modern countries of Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Greece and Albania, all the major cities in these places had been visited either by Paul or people under his leadership in less than twenty-five years. [**Picture** of map of Roman world showing the extent of Paul’s travels –use at this point]



When we remember that most of the journeys were on foot, though some by sea, without any modern forms of communication, it is an extraordinary accomplishment. The mission strategy of Paul was to establish a church in the main urban centre(s) of a Roman province and then ask the newly-established congregation to take the responsibility of then taking the gospel to the towns and then the smaller villages and hamlets of the district. His words here do not mean that he had visited every settlement in these countries or even passed through them, simply that the task he had set himself was accomplished in less than a quarter of the century. His mind now turns to the ‘What next’ could be done in the remaining years of his life. It is in the context of what he plans to do next that the opportunity for a visit to the Church in Rome becomes both possible and necessary. His ‘home church’ for his work in Eastern Europe and what we call the Middle East had been at Antioch in Syria, the home of the first Christian missionaries. However, with his thoughts turning to Western Europe a new base for his ministry was required and he viewed the church in Rome as suitable for this purpose. It is a profound challenge to us about making our lives count for the Lord. The time we have is very short –we need to ask ourselves is my time management, my choice of activities over the weekly or monthly schedule the best balance it can be with the responsibilities the Lord has entrusted to me? None one else can answer that question for us. Paul and many subsequent pioneering male and female missionaries chose to remain single because of the demands of this kind of work. Some church leaders in the modern era, like John Stott, have done the same for very similar reasons. The question for all of us is not should I copy this or that great Christian man or woman from the past, but am I willing to be whom God called me to be and to carry out the work He has provided for me to do?

(b) **Paul was planning to start church-planting in Spain** (Romans 15:24)²⁴ *I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to see you while passing through and that you will assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while.* He is writing the letter from the port of Corinth in Greece. The post-woman who will deliver his letter to the Church in Rome is Phoebe, a lady deacon of the Church in Cencrea, the port of Corinth (Romans 16:1-2: I

commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchrea. ²I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me. The apostle mentions her in the body of the letter so that the recipients of the letter know that this is not only a genuine letter from Paul, but also delivered by the person to whom he is entrusting the letter. How we would love to know more about this lady. It is likely that Phoebe (like Lydia, the Turkish businesswoman in Philippi Acts 16:14) was a wealthy businesswoman who had interests not only in Greece, but also in Rome, capital city of the Empire. She was not only one of the key Christian lay-leaders in the area, but had provided funds for God's work in a fair number of places, including covering expenses for Paul and possibly other team members on some of his missionary journeys. Paul, having been given notice of her forthcoming trip to Rome takes the opportunity to write to this local church to prepare the way for a future visit by him. He is hoping that the Church in Rome will adopt him as a link missionary working in Spain. However, they have never met him and he feels it appropriate, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to set out the Gospel he proclaims on his missionary tours. It is not a systematic theology covering all the major theological topics, rather an evangelistic message covering the problem of sin (chs1-3); the provision of salvation (chs4-5); the process of sanctification (chs6-8); the particular position of the Jewish people (chs9-11); prior to some ethical instruction for living out the faith as a minority community in the Roman world (chs 12-15), together with personal greetings at the end (ch16). In Corinth Paul's host is Gaius (Romans 16:23; I Corinthians 1:14), a man he had baptized when previously in Corinth, another prominent business person in whose home Paul is staying while working in Corinth. It was also the location of the meetings of the Church in Corinth, so it is clearly a large Roman villa of impressive proportions. Erastus, Timothy and Sopater were with Paul when Romans was written (Romans 16:21, 23) and also when he was in Greece (Acts 19:22; 20:2-4). On both occasions Paul intended to go to Jerusalem and then to Rome (Acts 19:21; Romans 15:24-26, 28).

(c) **Paul's immediate intentions were to visit the Church in Jerusalem** (Romans 15:25-33)

²⁵Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the Lord's people there. ²⁶For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the Lord's people in Jerusalem. ²⁷They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings. ²⁸So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this contribution, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way. ²⁹I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ. ³⁰I urge you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. ³¹Pray that I may be kept safe from the unbelievers in Judea and that the contribution I take to Jerusalem may be favourably received by the Lord's people there, ³²so that I may come to you with joy, by God's will, and in your company be refreshed. ³³The God of peace be with you all. Amen The first believers in Jerusalem had made huge financial sacrifices in the early years of the Christian Church to support the needs of new converts who were staying on in Jerusalem after their conversions. The apostle was conscious that money or other investments normally put aside to assist in later years had been spent on assisting believers from other countries; therefore, they in general terms, not necessarily people who had been personally assisted, had a responsibility to support these Jewish believers as a sign of their fellowship together in the Gospel. The local congregations may have been autonomous, but were responsible to one another, to support and assist each other where appropriate. Paul wanted the joy of passing on the money collected by Churches in Greece for their poor brothers and sisters in Jerusalem, before coming to Rome. However, he did not know how he would get on when he visited Jerusalem as a small number of fanatical Jews who had opposed his missionary work might stir up the crowds against him there, as well as in their own countries, and humanly-speaking, in that

context, anything could happen. However, unless things went seriously wrong Paul expected to be in Rome in the not-too distant future. Likewise we ought to plan for the future as wisely and carefully as we can, but at the same time be very conscious that our lives are in His hands and what He may allow to cross our pathway good or challenging may be very different to what we had anticipated. Yet we pray that His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

2. A description of the author of the letter (Romans 1:1)

(a) **Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus** (1:1a) The letter writing convention of that day was to begin with the name of the sender prior to the name of the addressee. In this case the introductory section is much longer than according to the standard conventions of the day. However, this is not a standard letter of either the business or personal variety. In addition, the author does not know the recipients and probably felt obliged to declare his credentials. How does he describe himself? His first term is one reflecting his humility as a 'doulos /slave' of Jesus Christ. This was following the Old Testament pattern where individual believers referred to themselves in this way. The author of Psalm 116 wrote: *O Lord, truly I am your servant...* (Ps.116:16a); In Isaiah 43:10 the nation collectively is referred to by God as *my servant whom I have chosen*; the model of humility was shown by Jesus in the New Testament (Philippians 2:7), both in His acceptance of His ministry on earth and in particular instances as at the last Supper where He washed the disciples feet (John 13:1-17), a task usually delegated to a Gentile slave. All believers are called to serve one another and others in His name, and for His glory. However, the second title of Paul was held by only a few individuals.

(b) **called to be an apostle** (1:1b) Jesus set apart twelve of His followers as apostles (Luke 6:13); after much prayer and deliberation. Paul was added to their number with his personal call from the Lord on the road to Damascus (Galatians 1:1: *Paul, an apostle –sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father...*). What qualifications were laid down before someone could claim this title? Acts 1:21-22 state: *Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.* These words were spoken after the death of Judas Iscariot and the deliberations by the Early Church on the criteria for appointing a successor. By contrast this was an exalted title, a privileged position but election in the Bible is for service and no-one endured so much hardship as Paul did in those first few decades of Christian history, nor did anyone else have as great an impact in laying the foundations for the future growth and prosperity of the Christian Church. In addition he states:

(c) **and set apart for the gospel of God** (1:1c) The Greek word translated here as *set apart* is the same root word from which the term Pharisee is derived. Jewish readers would probably have noted this marker laid down by the apostle who has changed from being a fanatical Pharisee opposed to all the Christian Church stood for to being a man totally dedicated to advancing the work of this witness, having been commissioned to it by the Lord Himself. In Galatians 1:16 Paul wrote: *But when God, who set me apart **from my mother's womb** and called me by His grace, was pleased ¹⁶ to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles...*; this statement is remarkably similar to Jeremiah's description of his own call to ministry six centuries earlier (Jeremiah 1:5). Therefore although a humble man conscious that he was undeserving of his office, Paul was equally bold in pointing to his authoritative position as the apostle to the Gentiles. It is as the officeholder of this position that he will articulate the message God has revealed to him concerning the nature of the gospel He is compelled to preach to the nations. Our calling (Matthew 28:19-20) from Jesus to spread the good news by word and deed is equally the top priority of Christians in each generation.

Others may have apostolic commissions as those sent out as missionaries and church-planters, but the first generation of Christians contained some unique individuals set apart as apostles and prophets, unlike any office-holder in subsequent generations. Paul in Ephesians 2:20 wrote that the Christian Church was: *built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone.*

3. A summary of the gospel with which he has been entrusted

(a) **The origin of the Gospel** *the gospel of God* (1:1c) This conviction is not only foundational to the letter but to the entire witness of the Christian Church down the ages. The message we proclaim is not a way to approach a deity, but the revealed means of salvation for all humanity from God Himself. This is not a popular message in today's pluralistic society where the public convention is of many opinions, but no absolute truth. This is of course nonsense. In various Olympic events, for example, competitors have found to their cost that even an unintentional minor infraction of the rules can lead to disqualification and the crushing of their hopes for a gold medal. It is equally true in many areas of society or fields of knowledge today. When we share our faith personally on a one-to-one basis or at a public podium, we may not utter the words: 'Thus says the Lord...' or 'God says', but we could have justification for that in principle, even though it may not be wise to do so in practice in many situations. Therefore, this renders it very serious when a person rejects a witness to the truth because they are not just turning their backs (hopefully only on a temporary basis) on someone's opinion, but on the very gospel of God Himself, the ultimate act of folly.

(b) **The authority behind the Gospel** *the Holy Scriptures* (Romans 1:2) ²*the gospel He promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures.* The Bible was, and is, authoritative for God's people and is the ground through which we can know the revealed will of God. For example, in I Corinthians 15:3-4, in the famous chapter on the significance of Jesus' resurrection for our later resurrection, the apostle uses a distinctive expression to emphasise the authority behind his words: *For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...* ; a different expression is used in Romans 3:21: *to which the Law and the Prophets testify...*but means the same thing. Peter, writing later concerning Paul's letters and how some people were misusing their contents for a different purpose, writes in II Peter 3:16, that they also have been doing it also with ***the other Scriptures***. This book has a unique place in human civilisation as the Word of God. We respect the claims of other faiths regarding their sacred writings, but in line with the Protestant Reformers of the 16th Century, we proclaim 'Sola Scriptura', the Bible alone is our authoritative account of the revealed will of God for His people.

(c) **The heart of the Gospel is Jesus** (Romans 1:3-4) ³*regarding His Son, who as to His earthly life—was a descendant of David, ⁴and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by His resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.* Christians have been criticised for 'always talking about Jesus, singing about Jesus, praying in the name of Jesus'. It is actually a compliment, because a church where Jesus is not at the centre of all that is taking place is not a biblical New Testament Church. In Romans 1:9 Paul writes: *God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of His Son...*Its all about You Jesus [Robin Mark, 'Jesus all for Jesus'] is absolutely spot on. Unlike any other world religion, Christianity would cease if Jesus was removed from it. Or if His death and resurrection had not in fact taken place; what does Paul mention in this brief summary of the place of Jesus in the Gospel? (i) **the humanity of Jesus** *who as to His earthly life—was a descendant of David.* There were sects who denied that one who was truly God could become a human being; a true presentation of the Gospel will affirm that Jesus was truly human in the

way that you and I are human beings, with feelings, mental faculties and physical capabilities –yet without sin, as distinct from us as Hebrews 4:15 points out: *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet He did not sin.* If Jesus was not truly human and capable of yielding to temptation, then this verse loses its power. However, because He perfectly withstood every temptation to sin, through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit, we too can be empowered to stand firm in our faith. However, the importance of the Holy Spirit, here called *the Spirit of holiness*, in the ministry of Jesus (and, therefore, equally important post-Pentecost in the lives of His followers), cannot be overstated. (ii) the deity of Jesus Jesus was the ‘Son’ or descendant ‘of David’, a messianic title from the Old Testament (examples include: II Samuel 7; Isaiah 11:1,10), but also stressed here is His title: *the Son of God*, to emphasise His deity. The deity of Christ is understood behind Paul’s words in Romans 5:10, with reference to Jesus’ sacrifice in our place on the cross: *For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to Him through the death of His Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through His life!* Similarly in Romans 8:3: *God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering...;* yet the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus is grounded on *His resurrection from the dead* (Romans 1:4). Our salvation was procured by the death of Jesus, but confirmed beyond doubt by God raising Him from the dead. The powerful action of the Holy Spirit in raising Jesus from the dead gives us the confidence not only to proclaim the Gospel to others, but upon it to ground our own hopes of resurrection life beyond the grave. Following His resurrection, the one who humbled Himself was exalted to the highest place as Philippians 2:9-11 declares: *Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name,¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.* How does Paul state the distinctive Christian confession: *Jesus Christ our Lord* (Romans 1:5). This became the baptismal confession of each candidate that *Jesus is Lord* (Romans 10:9-10: *if you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.¹⁰ For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.* This title used of God the Father in the Old Testament (Isaiah 45:22-24) is correctly used also of Jesus, an extraordinary thing to say in Jewish circles in New Testament times.

(d) The scope of the gospel is world mission (Romans 1:5-6)

⁵ *Through Him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for His name’s sake.* ⁶ *And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.* The wording is different to the great commission of Jesus in Matthew 28:18-20 or Acts 1:8, but the message is the same. Christ-centred, Spirit empowered, followers of God will never rest content while there are people on earth who still face an eternity separated from God. Behind the urgency of the gospel proclamation stands the eternal realities of heaven and hell. Jesus came to save us from hell and transform us to be like Him in heaven and in so doing to play our part in the transformation of God’s created order to fulfil His original purposes for it, as Paul will explain later in Romans 8:18-21. Therefore, if you and I claim to be followers of Jesus we will pray for people who need Jesus, seek to speak to people who need Jesus, invest in mission at home and overseas to support this end. Paul, in effect is bringing his introductory remarks to a climax by inviting this congregation to become a missionary people not only at home, but through investing in Paul and his missionary colleagues in work in other lands.

(e) The specific local application of the gospel in Rome (Romans 1:7-15)

⁷ *To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.* ⁸ *First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world.* ⁹ *God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you* ¹⁰ *in my prayers at all*

times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.¹¹ I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong –¹² that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. ¹³I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.¹⁴ I am a debtor both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. ¹⁵That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome. He follows these key introductory remarks with a commendation of their exemplary faith which is encouraging fellow believers *all over the world* (Romans 1:8b)! If that is true then –how much is this important that each local church endeavours to encourage other believers by its faithful witness for Jesus. Partnership in mission but also partnership in prayer one for the other; we may not be able to go in person to overseas missionary service; we may not have financial or other gifts to support the work, but no believer can excuse themselves from praying for the extension of God's kingdom at home and overseas. Only a minority of Christians can visit churches in other lands at any given time, but all can recognise our partnership in the Gospel through regular intercessory prayer. This serves to remind us that we are part of something so much bigger than we could ever imagine. You are not on your own, part of a local congregation, part of the wider family of churches, part of the roughly 800 million, and growing, Evangelical Christian family around the globe, together proclaiming the Gospel of God, together exalting the name of Jesus in the power of the Spirit; together playing our part in the fulfilment of the prayer model passed on by Jesus, may *Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven* (Matthew 6:10), Amen