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THE LETTER TO THE ROMANS 1-8

**Bible Studies 1-3**

May 2019

## Introduction

### The most important letter ever written?

Paul's letter to the Romans is one of the most significant and influential single documents in human history. The early church recognised its importance when they selected it as the first of Paul's letters in the New Testament collection, even though it was clearly not the first letter he wrote. Its thorough and systematic treatment of the core teachings of the Christian faith is so rich and wonderful.

And what an impact this letter has had on the course of church history! Reading Romans brought the great theologian and church leader, Augustine of Hippo, to faith in Christ. Teaching Romans convinced Martin Luther of the waywardness of the church of his day and opened the way for the Protestant Reformation. Studying Romans so moved John Wesley and ignited his faith that he (and others with him) went on to lead a massive revival in the church in England and America – a revival that ultimately led to gospel-hearted people being sent with the very first settlers to Australia to establish healthy, gospel-proclaiming churches here.

Martin Luther called Romans “the chief book in the New Testament and the purest gospel.” John Calvin wrote that if we understand Romans “we have an open door to all the most profound treasures of Scripture.” John Knox<sup>a</sup> stated that Romans is “unquestionably the most important letter ever written.”

A letter that has so profoundly shaped history – how will studying it now shape **your** life? Do be praying that it will!

### Background

Paul wrote Romans from Corinth in 57 AD, about three years before he first arrived in the Imperial capital as a prisoner of Caesar. The Roman church, in other words, was not one that Paul had established. The first Romans to hear the gospel were Roman Jews who had heard Peter preach in Jerusalem at Pentecost in 33 AD (Acts 2:10), a year or so before Paul himself had become a follower of Jesus (Acts 9) and nearly 30 years before Paul first set foot in Rome (Acts 28).

In due course, the gospel also reached Gentiles (non-Jews) in Rome, and for a time (after Emperor Claudius expelled everyone of Jewish heritage from Rome in 49 AD), the church in Rome would have been an exclusively Gentile Christian church. In the mid-50s AD (after the death of Claudius) Jews began returning to Rome, so that the church Paul wrote his letter to was once again a mixture of Jewish and Gentile believers. However, there were clearly tensions between the two groups – tensions threatening not only the unity of the church, but the purity of the very gospel they proclaimed.

### Purpose

So in writing Romans, Paul had a number of challenges to overcome. First, he needed the Roman Christians to accept his authority as the Christ-appointed apostle to the Gentiles to shape and correct their understanding of the gospel. They hadn't heard it from him initially, but now he needed to lay the true gospel before them again.

Second, he needed to correct, in particular, the false teachings of certain Jewish-background believers. These Christian Jews had clearly heard about Paul and the message he was spreading across the Mediterranean, and they were singularly unimpressed (Rom 3:8)! They believed that Paul was anti-Jew, and that his gospel contradicted God's authoritative word in the Old Testament Scriptures.

Third, it seems that the Gentile-background believers had become quite arrogantly dismissive of their Jewish-background brothers and sisters, denigrating their cultural religious practices, and accusing them of

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<sup>a</sup> The 20<sup>th</sup> century American theology professor. Not to be confused with the 16<sup>th</sup> century Scottish Reformer of the same name.

barely being Christian at all (calling them “weak” in the faith – Rom 14:1). There was a serious split forming in the church along both doctrinal and cultural lines.

And fourth, if all this wasn’t difficult enough, Paul himself needed the church in Rome’s support. As the divinely-commissioned apostle to the Gentiles, Paul was determined to take the gospel to the outer-reaches of the Roman Empire – through Italy and on to Spain, and then, potentially, to return to Palestine via North Africa. But for this missionary expedition, he needed financial and material aid, and he was hoping the Christians in Rome could help with that.

Presenting himself as their apostle, to correct their false belief and mend their disunity, so as to win them back to the truth and gain their support as partners in sending the gospel to the ends of the earth – What a task Paul was confronted with! And what a letter to address it!

## Structure

Called by many Paul’s “Magnum Opus” (Paul’s “great work”), Romans has been carefully and artfully written. It takes us down a clear and logical path, which can be summarized as follows:

Chapters	Summary
1-4	<b>Righteousness</b> All people stand equally condemned before God, and are justified (declared righteous) by faith alone apart from works of the Law, on the basis of Jesus’ death for sin.
5-8	<b>Peace</b> For those who have been justified by faith, salvation is guaranteed. Nothing, not even death, sin or the Law, can prevent God from finally bringing his adopted children to salvation.
9-11	<b>Faithfulness</b> Through this wonderful mercy shown towards his chosen from among both Jews and Gentiles, God remains faithful to his word; his elect people will be saved.
12-16	<b>Sacrifice</b> The appropriate way for the recipients of God’s mercy to respond is to offer to God the new sacrifice of a renewed life.

If you find yourself getting a bit lost as you work through this profound letter, then come back to this summary to re-orient yourself to where Paul is taking you.

May God richly bless you, filling you with joy and peace and hope as you hear and meditate again on his great gospel word!

### For starters

1. A non-Christian friend asks you to tell them what Christianity, at its core, is all about, but you only have one minute to do it. What do you say?

### About Paul

#### *Read Romans 1:1*

Notice the first word Paul chooses to describe himself – “servant”. In fact, the word Paul uses literally means “slave” (NET translation) or “bond-servant” (NASB translation). It refers to a person who has sold themselves into slavery; a person who no longer has the freedom to choose their own life path, but who is the legal property of a slave master.

2. If one of Paul’s aims in this letter (see the introduction to these studies) was to persuade the Roman Christians of his spiritual authority over them, what is striking about this opening description?
3. Who was Paul’s slave master and what title does Paul give him?

Why, then, was Paul proud of his identity as “a slave of Jesus Christ”?

4. What status did Paul’s master give to him? That is, what title did Jesus bestow on Paul, and what does that title mean?
5. Read Paul’s own account of his commissioning by Jesus in **Acts 26:12-18**. What was the job Jesus gave him?

How does Paul express his job description in Romans 1:1?

6. Summarise in your own words what you've discovered about Paul:

- What is his identity?
- What is his status?
- What is his job?

7. Why does Paul begin his letter like this?

When people denigrate Paul and his teaching (as they do from time to time), who and/or what are they ultimately denigrating?

## About the gospel

***Read Romans 1:1-4***

8. How does Paul describe the gospel at the end of verse 1? Whose is it?

Why is this important?

9. What does Paul say about the gospel in verse 2?

Why is this important?

In verses 3-4 Paul summarises the content of God's gospel using three phrases. It is very difficult to capture in English exactly the way Paul has set out these three phrases. Here is one attempt:

God's gospel regarding:

- (a) his Son—born from David's seed (according to the flesh);
- (b) the Son of God in power—appointed from the resurrection of the dead (according to the Spirit of holiness);
- (c) Jesus Christ our Lord.

10. How would an Old Testament Jew understand phrase (a)?

What extra dimension does phrase (b) add to this?

What two titles does phrase (c) give to Jesus, and how do they relate to phrases (a) and (b)?

11. Summarise in your own words what God's gospel is about.

Why is God's gospel all about Jesus?

## Reflection

12. Look back at your answer to question 1. How (if at all) did your summary of the essential Christian message (the gospel) differ from Paul's summary here?

If your summary was different, why do you think it was different?

How has this opening paragraph of Romans changed or clarified your understanding of the Christian faith?

How might you answer your friend now?

### For starters

1. What are your life's goals, and what motivates you to try to achieve them?

### Unpacking Romans

We learnt in the first study that Paul, as Christ's slave, was charged to take God's gospel to all the nations. And that gospel is about the one who is the fulfilment of God's work in history, and also the powerful, eternal, divine ruler over all – Jesus Christ our Lord. In other words, under orders from the Lord Jesus, Paul declares everywhere and to everyone: Jesus, the promised saviour, rules.

Jesus rules. So what?

That is now the big question Paul turns to in the passage for this study – a passage which also anticipates Paul's teaching in the whole of the rest of the letter. That is, Romans as a whole will unpack in detail what the gospel of the Lord Jesus is and what that means for his people. Romans 1:5-17 is his summary and advance preview.

#### **Read Romans 1:5-17**

2. The Lord Jesus Christ gave his slave Paul a job to do. From verse 5, what is the outcome Paul is working to achieve – the goal of his ministry?

What is to be Paul's ultimate motivation in doing this? That is, who or what is his ministry ultimately for?

Why is this important to understand?

The NIV translation has a footnote to one of the key ideas in the verse: "the obedience that comes from faith". The footnote suggests as an alternative: "the obedience that is faith". Most other translations just keep what Paul literally says (even though it is a little difficult to understand): **"the obedience of faith"**.

What does this tricky, yet crucial little expression mean? The two options are:

- (i) A life of obedient actions which is motivated by our faith in Jesus (NIV translation)
- (ii) The obedience God ultimately demands, which is to put our faith in Jesus (NIV footnote)

Let us see if the rest of the passage helps us to decide.

3. Where else in this passage can you find "faith" mentioned?

NOTE: Our two English words, "faith" and "belief", translate the **same** word in Greek. That is, "faith" = "belief".

What about “obedience”? Where else can you find it mentioned? (HINT: Trick question!)

Notice what happens with Paul’s mentions of “faith” and/or “obedience” towards the end of the passage (verses 16-17). What do you think is the big thing Paul wants to stress?

4. So if the big question verses 5-17 are answering is, “Jesus rules — So what?” What is Paul’s answer?

What does Paul want to achieve by writing this letter to the Roman Christian church? (See also verse 8 and verses 11-12)

What do you now think Paul means by “the obedience of faith” in verse 5?

5. Express in your own words what the goal of Paul’s ministry is.

We’re not done with this passage yet! Verses 16-17 are **the** key verses for understanding the rest of Romans, especially chapters 1-8. However, there are more knots to untangle, particularly in verse 17.

Verse 17 contains another important but tricky expression. (If you’re getting worried by how many difficult things there are in this passage, remember that these few verses contain a summary and advance preview of everything Paul will teach in the next 16 chapters. It’s bound to be complicated! – But Paul will take the time to spell it all out as we continue through the letter.)

The tricky expression is Paul’s quote from Habakkuk 2:4, which literally reads, “**The righteous by faith will live**”. Again, there are two options as to what this means:

- (i) **Q:** How should the righteous live? **A:** “The righteous — *by faith will live*”  
(Faith is the controlling principle of the righteous person’s life)
- (ii) **Q:** How am I saved? **A:** “*The righteous by faith — will live*”  
(The person who is declared righteous on the basis of faith is given eternal life)

Which one is it? Once again, we will see if the context helps us to decide.

6. What does Paul say about the gospel in verse 16?

- What does it accomplish?
- Who does it accomplish this for?

Verse 17 begins with the word “For”. In other words, verse 17 explains or clarifies verse 16. That being the case, what do you think the Habakkuk quote in verse 17 means?

7. If (as we saw in verse 5) the **goal** of Paul’s ministry is to bring about faith in Jesus among all people, and if Paul’s primary **motivation** is to bring honour to Jesus as people come under his rule, then what **benefit** do those who believe receive in all of this for themselves (verse 17)?

Why, therefore, is Paul “not ashamed” of the gospel?

## Reflection

8. In the introductions to Paul’s other letters, he often expresses his thankfulness to God for several qualities in the life of his readers, e.g., their faith, hope and love (see Col 1:3-5; 1 Thess 1:2-3). But in Romans the only thing he mentions is their faith (verse 8). Why do you think his focus is so narrow here?

If a new person turned up to church, what is the most important thing you would want to find out about them? Is that what Paul would want to know?

9. Think again about the goal, the motivation, and the benefit of Paul’s ministry (question 7 above). In what ways do (or don’t) you see those things driving the ministry of our church?

What kinds of things should we be praying for leaders in our church (ministry staff, Growth Group leaders, youth and children’s leaders, etc.)?

How, in your own life, can you be supporting essential gospel ministry – at church, in your life day-to-day, and in the world beyond?

### For starters

1. People often assume that the Christian faith is all about trying to be good. Why do they think that?

### Unpacking Romans

So far in these studies we have seen that:

- (i) God's gospel message is about Jesus, not us. It declares that Jesus is both Christ and Lord.
- (ii) The most fundamental response to the gospel message is faith – to trust in Jesus as our promised saviour and divine king.

These two truths, answering the two big questions – “What is the gospel?” and “How should I respond to the gospel?” – form the foundation on which the whole of Romans is built.

Verses 16-17 in particular set the agenda for the rest of Paul's teaching. So as we jump into the first big section Romans, let's return briefly to those two headline verses, to pick up two more significant ideas: what exactly is “God's righteousness”, and what does the expression, “from faith to faith” mean?

(Remember that we looked at a third significant idea in the previous study: “The righteous by faith will live.”)

#### **Read Romans 1:16-17 (my translation below)**

<sup>16</sup>For I don't feel shame at the gospel, for it is God's power for salvation to everyone who believes – to the Jew first and also to the Greek. <sup>17</sup>For God's righteousness is revealed in it from faith for faith, just as it is written, “However, the one who is righteous from faith will live.”

2. Before we look ahead to Romans 1:18-3:26, share with the group what you think those two expressions might be talking about.
  - What is “God's righteousness”?
  - What does it mean to say that God's righteousness is revealed in the gospel “from faith to (or for) faith”?

#### **Read Romans 1:18-32**

3. Verse 17 led us to expect that Paul would be talking about the revelation of God's righteousness. But what does he speak about first instead (verse 18)?

Who is God angry with, and why (verse 18)?

Is God's anger justified? Why/why not (verses 19-20)?

4. What has God done in response to human idolatry? (Idolatry is treating something that is *not* God as though it *is* God)

How have people reacted, and what does this say about their idolatry?

***Read Romans 2:1-11***

5. In Romans 1:18-32 Paul was describing human beings in general. Now he focuses in on one group of people in particular. Who are they (verse 1; see also verses 9-11)?

What is the truth about themselves that they have failed to understand (verses 2-5)?

When God comes to judge humanity, will he treat his chosen nation, the Jews, differently from non-Jews (Gentiles)? Why/why not?

***Read Romans 2:12-29***

Note that when Paul talks about circumcision, he is using this as a shorthand way of referring to devout, practising Jews. According to Old Testament law, all Jewish boys were to be circumcised when they were eight days old. Circumcision became the lifelong, visible mark of their identity as God's uniquely chosen people and heirs of God's promises. It was a point of deep cultural pride – the sign that they had been blessed in a way no other nation had been.

6. When it comes to God's judgement, does someone who is born a Jew get a free pass? Why/why not?

What makes someone a "true Jew"?

**Read Romans 3:1-8**

7. If being born as a member of God's chosen nation and having the membership mark of circumcision can't guarantee that a person will survive God's judgement, then was there ever any benefit in being a Jew at all? What does Paul say?

**Read Romans 3:9-20**

8. There was certainly an advantage to being born a Jew, but it turns out that this was only an advantage in theory, not in reality. Why? What went wrong (for both Jews **and** Gentiles), and whose fault is this?

What can a devout Jew gain, therefore, from observing God's law?

According to what we have seen so far, is there any hope under God's judgement for anyone at all?

**Read Romans 3:21-26**

9. What is the exciting new thing that Paul says has now been made known, and where have we already heard about this in Romans?

**A crucial verse!**

We saw earlier that the word for "faith" and "belief" in Greek is the same. In English we have to use those two different words, because we can't turn "faith" into a verb (an action). But as well as that, in Greek the noun, "faith", can also mean "faithfulness". So with those things in mind, below is an attempt to capture the meaning of verse 22 (leading in from verse 21, and in slightly awkward English!):

<sup>21</sup>*But now, apart from the law, God's righteousness has been made known (having been witnessed to by the law and the prophets), <sup>22</sup>namely, God's righteousness by means of Jesus Christ's faithfulness, for all those who have faith ...*

Where has God's righteousness been made known, and who benefits?

What is the benefit that those who have faith receive from God's righteousness (verses 22b-24)? (NOTE: In Greek, the words "righteous" and "just" are the same word. "To be justified" means "to be declared righteous")

How is it possible for God to be just, while at the same time justifying wicked sinners? That is, if God is saying that sinners are righteous, and is accepting them as such, isn't that wrong (verses 25-26)?

10. So then, what is God's righteousness, where is it revealed, and how is this "from faith for faith" (Romans 1:17)?

## Reflection

11. Reflect on the big picture of what Paul is saying in Romans 1:18-3:26.

- Does God have any right to be angry with you? Why/why not?
  
- Without Jesus, what hope would you have under God's judgement?
  
- What has God's righteousness accomplished as far as your sin is concerned, and how has it accomplished this?
  
- What does the revelation of God's righteousness mean to you? What difference does it make in your life?

Read Romans 1:16-17 again, and then spend some time praying in response to what you have learnt from Romans today – confessing, repenting, thanking, praising.

*<sup>16</sup>For I don't feel shame at the gospel, for it is God's power for salvation to everyone who believes – to the Jew first and also to the Greek. <sup>17</sup>For God's righteousness is revealed in it from faith for faith, just as it is written, "However, the one who is righteous from faith will live."*