

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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Romans

Romans has been called the greatest theological document ever written. In this letter, the apostle Paul explains the Good News—the climactic revelation of God to the world through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul reflects on the human condition, on the meaning of our lives on earth, and on our hope for the world to come. He constantly moves us back to the fundamentals of God's truth revealed in Christ, and he teaches us to deal with the problems, failures, and disputes that characterize life in this world.

Setting

We do not know who first brought the Good News to Rome. Perhaps Jews from Rome who were converted when God first poured out his Spirit on the day of Pentecost (see [Acts 2:10](#)) took the message back to their home city. Several “house churches” quickly grew up, made up primarily of converts from Judaism.

In AD 49, the Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome—including Jewish Christians (see [Acts 18:2](#)). Although Paul had never visited Rome ([Rom 1:13](#)), in his travels he met some of these Roman Christians, such as Priscilla and Aquila ([Rom 16:3-4](#); cp. [Acts 18:2](#)).

Claudius’s decree eventually lapsed, so by the time Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, many Jewish Christians had returned to Rome. However, in their absence, the Gentile Christians had taken the lead in the Christian community in Rome. Therefore, when Paul wrote to the Roman Christians (probably around AD 57), the Roman Christian community was divided into two major factions. The Gentile Christians now comprised the majority group, and they were naturally less concerned about continuity with the Old Testament or with the demands of the law of Moses than their Jewish brothers and sisters. They apparently even looked down on the Jewish Christians (see [Rom 11:25](#)). The minority Jewish Christians, for their part, reacted to the Gentile-Christian majority by insisting on adherence to certain aspects of the law of Moses. Paul wrote this letter to the Roman Christians to address this theological and social division, a schism that had at its heart the question of continuity and discontinuity between Jewish and Christian faith.

Summary

In the introduction of the letter ([1:1-17](#)), Paul identifies himself and his readers ([1:1-7](#)), expresses thanks for the Roman Christians ([1:8-15](#)), and introduces the theme of the letter: the “Good News about Christ” ([1:16-17](#)).

Before elaborating on this Good News, Paul sets out the dark backdrop of universal human sinfulness that makes the Good News necessary. Both Gentiles ([1:18-32](#)) and Jews ([2:1-3:8](#)) have turned away from God’s revelation of himself. All are “under the power of sin/under sin” and cannot be made right with God by anything they do ([3:9-20](#)).

Into this hopeless situation comes the Good News, which reveals a new “way to be made right” with God. God provided this new way by sending Jesus as a sacrifice for sin, and all human beings can gain the benefits of that sacrifice by faith ([3:21-26](#)). In [3:27-4:25](#), Paul highlights the nature and centrality of faith. He shows that faith excludes boasting and that it enables both Jews and Gentiles to have equal access to God’s grace in Christ ([3:27-31](#)). He develops these same points through reference to Abraham ([4](#)).

In [chs 5-8](#), Paul discusses the assurance or security of salvation. The assurance that believers will share God’s glory ([5:1-11](#)) is based on the way in which Jesus Christ more than reversed the terrible effects of Adam’s sin ([5:12-21](#)). Neither sin ([ch 6](#)) nor the law ([ch 7](#)) can prevent God from accomplishing his purposes for the believer. The Holy Spirit liberates believers from death ([8:1-17](#)) and assures them that the sufferings of this life will not keep them from the glory to which God has destined them ([8:18-39](#)).

The Good News can only truly be “good news” if the message of Christ stands in continuity with God’s promises in the Old Testament. But the unbelief of so many Jews might seem to show that God’s promises to Israel are not being fulfilled ([9:1-5](#)). So, in [chs 9-11](#), Paul demonstrates that God is being faithful to his promises. God had never promised salvation to all Jews, but only to a remnant ([9:6-29](#)). The Jews themselves are responsible for their predicament because they refuse to recognize the fulfillment of God’s promises in Christ ([9:30-10:21](#)). Nonetheless, God is faithfully preserving a remnant of Jewish believers ([11:1-10](#)), and God has still more to accomplish for his people Israel ([11:11-36](#)).

The Good News rescues people from the penalty of sin, and it also transforms a person’s life. In [12:1-15:13](#), Paul turns his attention to the transforming power of the Good News. This transformation demands a whole new way of thinking and living ([12:1-2](#)). The transformed life will be fleshed out in community harmony ([12:3-8](#)), manifestations of love ([12:9-21](#); cp. [13:8-10](#)), and submission to the government ([13:1-7](#)). The transformed life derives its power from the work God has already done and finds its urgency in the work he has yet to do ([13:11-14](#)).

In [14:1-15:13](#), Paul tackles a specific issue that was a problem in the church at Rome. Christians were criticizing each other over various practices related to the Old Testament law. Paul exhorts them to accept each other and to look to Christ’s example of self-giving love as the model to emulate.

The letter format of Romans emerges again at the end, where Paul touches on his ministry and travel plans ([15:14-33](#)), greets and commends fellow workers and other Christians ([16:1-16](#)), and concludes with further references to fellow workers, a final warning, and a doxology ([16:17-27](#)).

Date, Place, and Occasion of Writing

Paul probably wrote Romans during a three-month stay in Corinth near the end of his third missionary journey ([Acts 20:2-3](#)), around AD 57. The reference to Cenchrea in [Romans 16:1](#)—a port city next to Corinth—identifies the geography more precisely. By this time, Paul had completed his missionary work in the eastern Mediterranean, and his visit to Jerusalem was imminent.

We can determine the general situation in which Romans was written by reviewing Paul's references to his prior ministry and his future travel plans ([15:14-33](#)). Four geographical references provide the framework: (1) Looking back, Paul declared that he had "fully presented the Good News of Christ from Jerusalem all the way to Illyricum" ([15:19](#)). Illyricum was a Roman province that occupied the same general area as modern-day Serbia and Croatia. Paul noted that he had planted churches in major cities from Jerusalem, through Asia Minor, and into Macedonia and Greece. This was the territory Paul and his companions covered on the three great missionary journeys recorded in Acts. (2) Paul's intermediate destination was Jerusalem, where he planned to deliver a "gift to the believers" ([15:25](#)). This gift was money that Paul had been collecting from the Gentile churches he had founded to assist the church in Jerusalem ([15:26](#); see also [1 Cor 16:1-4](#); [2 Cor 8:1-9:15](#)). (3) After visiting Jerusalem to deliver the collection, Paul planned to go to Rome ([Rom 15:24](#)). (4) A long stay with the Roman Christians was not Paul's final goal, as the language of [15:24](#) ("stop off") makes clear. His ultimate goal was Spain, where he could pursue his calling to plant churches in places "where the name of Christ has never been heard" ([15:20, 24](#)). This information points to a date near the end of the third missionary journey.

Paul's Purpose in Writing

Romans combines three specific purposes: to summarize Paul's theology, to solicit support for a future mission to Spain, and to bring unity to the church in Rome.

Paul was at a critical juncture in his ministry ([15:20](#)). He had "fully presented" the Good News to the eastern Mediterranean basin ([15:19](#)). He now stood ready to preach the Good News in new territory. It is quite natural, then, that Paul took the occasion of his letter to the Romans to summarize his theology as he had hammered it out in the midst of controversy and trial for the previous twenty-five years.

Even so, summarizing theology is not Paul's whole purpose in writing—Paul says little about certain key theological ideas (e.g., the person of Christ, the church, the last days). Nor does this purpose explain why Paul would have sent such a summary to the church in Rome specifically.

Another purpose then emerges: Paul wanted to gather support from the Roman Christians for his new mission in Spain. Paul's "sending church," Antioch, was thousands of miles from Spain. As the apostle sought a new church to partner with him, his attention naturally turned to the church in Rome ([15:24](#)). Therefore, it is likely that Paul sent this dense theological treatise to Rome because he wanted to explain who he was and what he believed. Because Paul's message had been frequently misunderstood, he became a controversial figure in the early church. He was undoubtedly aware that some Christians in Rome were suspicious of him and that he therefore must provide a careful and reasoned defense of his position on some of the most debated issues of the faith.

Paul also wrote for a third reason: to heal a rift in the Christian community in Rome, which was divided over the degree to which the Old Testament law should continue to guide believers (see [14:1–15:13](#)).

Meaning and Message

In Romans, Paul presented the Good News as he had come to understand it. The heart of that Good News is the offer of salvation in Christ for all who believe. Paul explores the problem of human sin, the solution provided in the cross of Christ, and the assurance of glory that a living relationship with Christ provides. The message of the cross of Christ stands both in continuity with the Old Testament (because its promises are truly fulfilled in Christ) and in discontinuity with it (as God in Christ inaugurates a new covenant that transcends the Old Testament law).

Interpretation

Since the time of the Reformation, Romans has been read as a letter about the salvation of the individual. Following the lead of Martin Luther, whose own spiritual pilgrimage was closely tied to Romans, the Reformers (such as John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli) saw in this letter the classic biblical expression of the truth that human beings are made right with God by their faith in Christ and not by their own effort. The Reformers viewed Paul as fighting against a legalistic Judaism that insisted that people had to obey the law to be saved. Jewish preoccupation with the law had led many Jews to presume that faithfulness to the law was sufficient for salvation (e.g., [10:1-4](#)).

Many contemporary interpreters insist that this Reformation perspective left out important elements in understanding both the letter itself and first-century Judaism. Jews in Paul's day, it is argued, did not believe that they had to obey the law to be saved. They were already saved, through God's choosing them to be his people. Obeying the law was the way they maintained their status as God's people. These interpreters say that Paul was not fighting against legalism but against exclusivism—against the Jewish claim that salvation was confined to Israel and was not to be shared with Gentiles. Accordingly, Paul shows how the Good News relates salvation through faith to the continuity of God's people from the Old Testament to the New Testament and to the relationship of Jews and Gentiles in his own day.

This new approach to understanding Romans has much to commend it. Christian interpreters have sometimes missed the notes of grace and faith that are part of Jewish teaching. And Romans does have a lot to say about including Gentiles in God's people and the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the church.

Ultimately, however, neither the Reformation view nor the contemporary view alone explains everything in Romans. These views need to be combined if we are to appreciate the letter as a whole. At its most foundational level, Romans is about the Good News—and the Good News, first and foremost, is a message about how everyone can have a right relationship with God.