**Introduction to Romans**

*Notes from this introduction are drawn from three sources: 1.* [*www.enterthebible.org*](http://www.enterthebible.org) *2. Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans by Martin Luther 3. New Interpreters Bible Commentary Volume 10*

**WHO WROTE the Epistle to the Romans?**

The Apostle Paul

**Romans 1:1 -** Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God,

**WHEN WAS IT WRITTEN?**

Romans was written somewhere between 55 and 58 C.E. from Corinth, probably at the home of Gaius, a resident of Corinth (see Romans 16:23; 1 Corinthians 1:14). Paul sent the letter to Rome, carried by Phoebe, deacon of the church at Cenchreae, the port of Corinth (Romans 16:1). According to Acts 20:3, Paul spent three months in Greece prior to his trip to Jerusalem. It may well have been at that time that he wrote Romans.

**Background:**

Romans differs from the other letters written by Paul. He wrote them to congregations he had founded, but Romans was written to a community of Christians that he had not founded. According to the letter itself, the Apostle Paul considered his evangelizing work completed in the eastern Mediterranean world and now had his sights set on going west, even as far as Spain (15:23-24). Located at the house of Gaius (16:23), a resident of Corinth (see 1 Corinthians 1:14), Paul writes to the Christians at Rome (he never speaks of a single "church" there) to let them know of his plans. He intends to travel to Spain by way of Rome, and he hopes that the Roman Christians will lend support to his mission to Spain (Romans 15:24).

Paul knows many of the Christians at Rome by name (as chapter 16 shows). The Christian community--made up of a core of Jewish Christians, but predominantly Gentile Christians--had been in existence for some time. The Jewish Christians had been expelled with other Jews by the Roman emperor Claudius in 49 C.E. (see Acts 18:1-3) but were allowed by Nero to return in 54 C.E. There clearly were differences between the (more traditional) Jewish and (newer) Gentile Christians in Rome on several issues. That accounts for Paul's treatment of issues that could divide, but should not. Paul indicates that prior to heading for Rome he has to take a collection to Jerusalem, but he has some foreboding of what will happen in Jerusalem and asks the Roman Christians to pray that he will be safe (Romans 15:30-32). According to Acts, however, that was not to be. Paul was arrested, imprisoned, and taken to Rome not as a free man but as a prisoner.

AUTHOR: [Arland J. Hultgren, Professor Emeritus and former Asher O. and Carrie Nasby Chair of New Testament](https://www.enterthebible.org/contributors.aspx?rid=917)

**From the preface of Martin Luther’s commentary:**

This Epistle is truly the chief part of the New Testament and the very purest Gospel. It is well worth a Christian's while not only to memorize it word for word but also to occupy oneself with it daily, as though it were the daily bread of the soul. It is impossible to read or to meditate on this letter too much or too well. The more one deals with it, the more precious it becomes and the better it tastes.

…

To begin with, we have to become familiar with the vocabulary of the letter and know what St. Paul means by the words law, sin, grace, faith, righteousness, flesh, spirit, etc. Otherwise there is no use in reading it.

**Summary:** (drawn from NIB, 406)

Chapters 1-4: God’s Gospel reveals (unveils) that in Jesus, the God of Israel has been true to the covenant established with Abraham, bringing salvation to the entire world. Through the faithfulness of Jesus, God has created a world wide family for Abraham marked by the sign of faith.

Chapters 5-8: God has done through Jesus what the covenant was set up to do – solve the problem of sin. In Jesus God has done for this new people what was done for Israel of Old: Redeemed us from the Egypt of enslavement of sin, led us through the wilderness of the present life (by the Spirit not by the Torah), and promised a new future (promised land) of a redeemed creation.

Chapters 9-11: This section highlights the tragedy of the gospel’s revelation of God’s righteousness – namely the ironic failure of Israel to believe in the Messiah. Yet, this too, turns out to be held within the strange purposes of God, whereby Israel’s fall, acted out on a grand scale in the death of Jesus, is the means by which salvation can extend to the whole world.

Chapters 12-16: The community that is created by this gospel must live as the true renewed humanity, in its internal and external life. In particular, it must reflect God’s intention that Jew and Gentile come together as one worshiping body in Christ.

**Introductory Issues:**

**Diatribe.** The term is derived from the Greek word diatribē, a word with several meanings, including "discourse." It refers to a form of presentation, oral or written, in which the speaker or writer confronts and debates an imaginary addressee in order to instruct those actually being addressed. Typically it makes use of hypothetical questions and false conclusions. Paul uses the technique frequently in his letters by setting up false inferences of the gospel and then correcting them. In Romans, diatribe is particularly evident in 1:18-3:20 (using an imaginary opponent at 2:1, 17; showing the opponent to be wrong at 2:4; naming false conclusions at 3:3-4, 9; and making his own conclusion at 3:19-20).

**Faith in or of Christ?** At several places in his letters (Romans 3:22, 26; Galatians 2:16, 20; 3:22; Philippians 3:9), Paul uses expressions in Greek (such as pistis Christou) that have traditionally been translated as "faith in Christ" (or some other christological title). That is how the phrase is rendered in the NRSV, RSV, NIV, and other modern translations of the Bible. But the NRSV includes footnotes in each instance to alert the reader that the phrase might in fact be understood better as the "faith of Christ," "Christ's faithfulness," or something similar. The "Pistis Christou Debate," as it is often called, continues among New Testament scholars.

**The law.** Paul uses the Greek word for "law" (nomos) in several senses. It can refer to the law of God in a broad sense, which even Gentiles can know and by which they can live (Romans 2:14-15); to the Mosaic law that guides Jewish life (Romans 8:3, 7; 9:31; Galatians 3:10; 4:21); to the Jewish Scriptures (the Old Testament) in a more general sense (Romans 3:19; 1 Corinthians 14:21); to the books of the Torah (the "Pentateuch," the first five books of the Old Testament) in particular (1 Corinthians 9:9; Galatians 4:21-27); to some general principle (Romans 7:21); and to "the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2).

**The salvation of the Jewish people.** In Romans 9-11 Paul laments that the Jewish people have not accepted the gospel. He probes why that is so, often drawing upon the Scriptures of Israel with a thoroughness not found elsewhere in his letters. Near the end of these three chapters Paul concludes that "all Israel will be saved" (11:26). The salvation of Israel will not be on the basis of observing the law of Moses but purely by the grace of God. Although interpreters have found it difficult to think that here Paul might be thinking of salvation of the Jewish people without their prior faith in Christ, Paul says that he is disclosing a "mystery" (11:25), a revelation from God that is not according to reason.

AUTHOR: [Arland J. Hultgren, Professor Emeritus and former Asher O. and Carrie Nasby Chair of New Testament](https://www.enterthebible.org/contributors.aspx?rid=917)

**Theological Themes:**

**Righteousness & Justice**: In Biblical thought, sin and evil are seen in terms of injustice – that is, of a fracturing of the social and human fabric. What is required, therefore, is that justice be done, not so much in the punitive sense that phrase often carries (though punishment comes into it), but in the fuller sense of setting to rights that which is out of joint, restoring things as they should be. … God’s righteousness, seen in the terms of covenant faithfulness and through the image of the law court, was to be the instrument of putting the world to rights – of what we might call cosmic restorative justice. (NIB 400)

**Adam and Christ.** In Romans 5:12-21 Paul discusses the tragedy of Adam's trespass against God, which affected all of humanity; all people are like Adam in their rebelliousness against God. But Christ was obedient, and his righteousness is available for all. His saving work exceeds the destruction that Adam caused. Paul takes up the Adam/Christ theme also in 1 Corinthians 15:21-23, 45-49.

**The Holy Spirit.** Paul speaks frequently about the Holy Spirit, using a wide range of expressions: "the Spirit of God," "the Spirit of Christ," "the Holy Spirit," "the Spirit of holiness," "the Spirit of God's Son," or simply "the Spirit." According to Paul, the Spirit prompts faith in a person (see 1 Corinthians 12:3), distributes spiritual gifts to members of the church (see 1 Corinthians 12:4-11), and empowers the life of the individual (Romans 8:1-11).

**Justification by faith.** This theme is probably the first that comes to mind for many when they think of Romans (and the same is true of Paul's letter to the Galatians). It is a major theme, emphasized strongly at Romans 3:21-26, 28, 30; 5:1. All of chapter 4 is about justification by faith in the case of Abraham and the implications that flow from it for those who share the faith of Abraham. Justification by faith means that one is justified (set in a right relationship) with God purely on the basis of one's trust (or faith) in the promises of God, and not by efforts known as doing the works of the law.

**The law.** For Paul, the law is holy, given by God as a gift to Israel (Romans 7:12), but it can also be misused when its ritual precepts (such as dietary commandments) are imposed upon Gentiles (as in Galatians 2:14; 5:1) and when it is used as a measure of one's presumed righteousness before God (Romans 3:19-20). According to Paul, Christians live under the lordship of Christ (not the law), but that will entail a life conformed to the will of God, which is summed up in the love commandment (Romans 13:9; see also Galatians 5:14).

**The righteousness of God.** Paul speaks of "the righteousness of God" at Romans 1:17; 3:21-22, 25; 10:3; and elsewhere in his letters. The expression does not refer to some standard (such as God's justice) but to God's saving work, which is made evident in the gospel (1:17).

**Sanctification.**The term refers to the process of making a person, place, or thing holy. In his letters Paul speaks of believers in Christ as persons who are sanctified already (1 Corinthians 1:2) or, in similar terminology, persons who are called to be saints, that is, sanctified persons (Romans 1:7). Persons are sanctified through baptism (1 Corinthians 6:11). On the other hand, Paul can speak of sanctification as a process in which a believer is engaged by means of a moral life (Romans 6:19-22; 1 Thessalonians 4:3).

**The weak and the strong.** In Romans 14:1-15:13 Paul addresses the "weak and the strong" at Rome. The "weak" are vegetarians, observe certain days, and drink no wine (14:1-2, 5, 21). The "strong" do not abide by such regulations (14:2-5, 10), and Paul identifies with them (15:1). The former probably were Jewish Christians who continued a Jewish way of life as Christians, and most likely the latter were mainly Gentiles (Paul being an exception). Paul urges the so-called "strong" to bear with and honor the others (14:1, 3-4, 15, 19-21, 23).

**The wrath of God.** The wrath of God is mentioned twelve times in Romans (1:18; 2:5 [twice], 8; 3:5; 4:15; 5:9; 9:22 [twice]; 12:19; 13:4, 5) and three times elsewhere by Paul (1 Thessalonians 1:10; 2:16; 5:9). Usually Paul says that God's wrath will be revealed at the last day as punitive judgment (Romans 2:5, 8; 3:5; 5:9; 9:22; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 5:9), but he also says that it can be seen already in the effects of the law (that is, divine judgment, as in Romans 4:15) and in the punishment of wrongdoers by temporal rulers (Romans 13:4-5).

AUTHOR: [Arland J. Hultgren, Professor Emeritus and former Asher O. and Carrie Nasby Chair of New Testament](https://www.enterthebible.org/contributors.aspx?rid=917)