

## p 7 WEEK 1: OVERVIEW

### Getting Acquainted

The apostle Paul's letter to the Romans is the longest of his letters and is brimming with his exhilarating captivation with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Romans can be seen as an epic in one sense, not just because of its length but because of its breadth and sweep. Paul begins his instruction with words about creation and the natural order, and then proceeds to show how mankind's disobedience brought disruption to them. Then Paul moves methodically—but beautifully—through the story of the Bible itself, recounting God's justice and grace throughout history, from the days of the patriarchs until the time of his writing. At the same time, Paul lays out the "anatomy" of salvation, telling both the wide-lens story of God's work in history to restore fallen creation and the finer, narrow-lens story of how God saves sinners through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ. Readers of Romans see both the wide-angle view and the close-up view of salvation.

All of this is even more remarkable when we consider that Paul probably wrote this letter in response to specific doctrinal and practical questions. How does law relate to faith? How do we as Christians relate to the pre-Christian era? How were those who came before Christ saved? How does gospel ministry to the Gentiles affect the Jews' standing with God? What unifies Jews and Gentiles in Christian practice? What divides them?

p 8 Paul's letter to the Romans sounds many minor notes (which does not mean they are insignificant) but every note serves to create the symphony revealing God's righteousness brought to bear in history through the saving work of Jesus. The major theme throughout this masterpiece is the powerful message of the cross of Christ, where God's wrath for sin and mercy on sinners finds its fulfillment and unity.

### Placing It in the Larger Story

While Romans is not the earliest of Paul's epistles (letters) to appear in the canon of Scripture (1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians were probably written earlier) it serves as a foundation of sorts for all his other letters. This is one reason, in addition to its length, why it appears first in the canon's epistles. The major ideas of all of Paul's other letters—sin, Christ, and the gospel—find their fullest expression in Romans, even though there are some major ideas explored in the shorter letters which are not explored in Romans (doctrines of the church, the nature of Christ, the end times, etc.).

The letter of Romans serves as a grand theological blueprint for the gospel doctrine undergirding the rest of the New Testament. This includes the letters of Peter and the letter of James, who at first glance may appear to diverge from Paul's teaching on justification. Appearing in the New Testament immediately after the four Gospels and Acts, Paul's letter to the Romans unpacks the significance of who Jesus is and what he did. Paul takes the Gospel narratives of Jesus and his apostles—as well as the Old Testament revelation they fulfilled—and reveals their doctrinal implications. In other words, Paul explains the theological meaning of the overarching story stretching from Genesis to Jesus and beyond, into the future.

## Key Passage

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.” (Rom. 3:23–25)

## Date and Historical Background

Paul most likely wrote his letter to the Romans in AD 57, while on his third missionary journey (see Acts 20:2–3), probably while in Corinth. Notes left by copyists at the end of two early manuscripts identify Corinth as its place of composition. Also, both Phoebe (Rom. 16:1–2) and Gaius (v. 23) had connections to Corinth.

**p 9** The epistle to the Romans is one of at least two letters Paul wrote to a church he had not visited or founded. Perhaps the church had been founded by inhabitants of Rome who had been in Jerusalem at Pentecost in Acts 2, had become believers, and had then returned to Rome (see Acts 2:10).

The circumstances giving rise to the letter are not entirely clear, but it seems that Paul was addressing theological questions that had been posed to him. One main cause for these questions was simmering hostility between Jewish and Gentile believers in the Roman church. Paul intended to visit Rome (Rom. 1:11–13), and this letter was meant to serve as an introduction to his teaching. Paul also hoped his letter would give rise to a broader missionary operation with Rome as its home base.

At the time of Paul's writing, Nero was emperor. Rome was not just the base of the Roman empire but was considered the base of civilization itself. It is no wonder that Paul hoped to see his readers' world turned upside down for the sake of God's kingdom. Politics and paganism freely merged in the capital city. In its day, Rome was New York, Los Angeles, London, and Paris rolled into one. But in every way the claims of Paul's gospel transcended those of imperial Rome.

## Outline

- I. **The Gospel as the Revelation of the Righteousness of God (1:1–17)**
- II. **God's Righteousness in His Wrath against Sinners (1:18–3:20)**

- III. **The Saving Righteousness of God (3:21–4:25)**
- IV. **Hope as a Result of Righteousness by Faith (5:1–8:39)**
- V. **God’s Righteousness Extended to Israel and to the Gentiles (9:1–11:36)**
- VI. **God’s Righteousness in Everyday Life (12:1–15:13)**
- VII. **The Extension of God’s Righteousness through the Pauline Mission (15:14–16:23)**
- VIII. **Final Summary of the Gospel of the Righteousness of God (16:25–27)**

## **As You Get Started ...**

What is your general understanding of the role of Paul’s letter to the Romans? What do you think this letter uniquely contributes?

**p 10** How do you understand the contribution of Romans to Christian theology? From your current knowledge of Romans, what does Paul teach us about God, humanity, sin, redemption, and other doctrines?

Some of Christianity’s more “famous” Bible verses come from the book of Romans. Which ones are you familiar with?

Romans contains some of the more provocative teachings of the Bible as well. Paul teaches on election and predestination, for instance, as well as the way of salvation for the Jewish people and his plan for Israel in the future. What perplexes you about Romans? Are there any confusing parts to this letter that you would like to resolve as you begin this study?

## **As You Finish This Unit ...**

**Take a moment to ask for the Lord’s blessing and help as you engage in this study of Romans.**