

Introduction to Romans

The apostle Paul is the author of Romans, a letter to believers in Christ living in the capital city of the Roman Empire. Paul, a missionary for twenty years, is at the height of his career. He has written other letters to congregations he founded or to people he brought to faith in Jesus. Romans is an exception to this pattern because Paul did not establish the church that met in that city. He longs to meet these believers, but this has not happened yet.

The Roman Christians are in transition. In 49 CE Emperor Claudius expelled Jews, including followers of Jesus who were Jewish, from Rome. Many left but then returned when that emperor died. The Jewish Christians coming back found a growing church run by non-Jewish Christians. Things were tense between the two groups.

Paul writes this letter to present his understanding of the gospel with the hope that it will be meaningful in their present context. He seeks to bring the two groups together by insisting upon their common identity in Christ.

The letter is organized in this way:

1:1-15

The letter to the Romans begins with an introduction that follows the form of most letters at the time. Into that form, Paul pours the content of his faith in Jesus.

1:16—5:21

Paul addresses the importance of the righteousness of God made present in Christ for all people. Christ stands against all condemnation, making his move while we are still weak, ungodly sinners.

6:1—8:39

Paul explains how that righteousness impacts the life of those who trust in God.

9:1—11:36

Paul delves into the role of Jews and gentiles in God's great plan of salvation.

12:1—15:13

Paul maps out the shape that life will take for those who trust in the good news.

15:14-33

Paul describes his plan for his missionary journeys in the days ahead.

16:1-27

Paul brings his letter to a close with blessings for those who have heard the message he has proclaimed.

The theme of the letter is stated concisely in 1:16-17, which we will study in session 1. Paul is an apostle, or representative, of the gospel. That gospel, or good news, is God's power that accomplishes salvation to all who trust in its message. When Paul and others announce the gospel, God is present as the righteous and just God who, in Christ, is reclaiming the world from the power of sin that now controls it. Those who trust in this gospel have a restored relationship with God. They are justified and saved from sin, death, God's judgment, and anything else that hinders them from trusting God's gracious declaration over them. The gospel is God's power of salvation, ultimately, for all humanity and indeed for all creation.

We will follow along as Paul's message unfolds, reading elements of most of these sections. In the case of the dense argument of Romans 9–12, which we will not explore in this study, a source to fill in the gap will be indicated.

The message of Romans would become significant for Martin Luther and his work as a teacher, writer, reformer, and preacher. As he maps his own faith journey, he insists that Paul's message marked a turning point for him that affected his whole life thereafter. In his "Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans," Luther writes, "This epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament, and is truly the purest gospel. . . . It is a bright light, almost sufficient to illumine the entire Holy Scriptures" (LW 35:365-366).

