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## **Summary**

No other letter has had more influence on the history of the West than Paul's letter to the Romans. But in order to understand Romans, we must remember that it was a real letter written to real people in a real situation, not a treatise of systematic theology. Paul opens the letter by defending his apostleship and his mission to the Gentiles. His major concern was developing ways to include the excluded.

## **Basic Bible References**

Romans 1:1–17

1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11

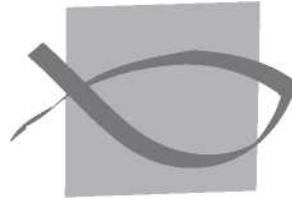
## **Word List**

apostle

gospel

righteousness

faith



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## TROUBLE, TROUBLE, TROUBLE— BUT HELP IS ON THE WAY

### **A Real Letter**

Letters! Those that exist are important windows into our history. Letters are quite different from emails or text messages. There are love letters, letters of invitation, business letters, letters of consolation, letters of thanks, and letters of recommendation. If you have them, save them. Why have the recipients often bundled them, to save and treasure them? And why do authors, like this one, write books about collections of letters and how to read them? I think it is because they transport us to other times and places and remind us of life's singular moments, intimate ties, its high and low tides. Or maybe it is because they open a window to the author's innermost thoughts, loves and hates, and even her/his character. You are studying the most intellectually demanding book in the New Testament, which was a letter. Your own experience in reading important letters can be helpful. Think back on those love letters you once received. Remember how you pored over them. How you noticed every little turn of phrase. How you sought to decipher each word. How you read between the lines. How you noticed changes from one letter to the next. And how you read them over and over, seeking confirmation or disconfirmation of the author's intent. Attention to the most minute detail and nuance was thought to be useful in reading the true intent of the writer. That same attention to detail can be very useful in reconstructing the conversation between Paul and his addressees in Rome.

Thankfully, someone collected the apostle's letters and now we are privileged to read letters we were never intended to see. Paul had no idea that his letters would ever become scripture. They were real letters to real people about real issues of faith and life.

To us, it seems only proper that these letters were included in the New Testament, for they offer insight, instruction, and a vigorous defense of his gospel for the Gentiles. No other letter has had more influence on the history of the West than Paul's letter to the Romans. In his *Confessions* Augustine relates how his conversion came in response to a little girl's song urging him to "pick it up and read." He took up the New Testament and read Romans 13:13ff: "not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh." In the letter to Romans, he found the key that unlocked his thinking on sin and grace and led to the formulation of a theology that has informed the church's thinking ever since. Others followed him. Augustine's influence on Luther, Calvin, Wesley, John Knox and countless others women and men is almost impossible to exaggerate.

The influence of these theological giants, however, as important as it was, has often hindered our ability to understand Romans. For Romans was not a treatise of systematic theology written for all time. It was a *real letter* written to *real people* in a *real situation*. When Paul wrote Romans, his back was against the wall. Vicious charges against him and his gospel had already reached Rome. His claim to be an apostle was weak. He had never known Jesus in the flesh; never heard Jesus speak beside the sea; never been one of the twelve disciples. Moreover, for a time he had vigorously persecuted the church. So some felt his claim to be an apostle was a fraud. Others felt that his inclusion of pagans among the elect without first requiring a conversion to Judaism and law observance was dangerously wrong. The moral lapses of his Gentile converts appeared to some as proof of the error of his approach.

In addition, Paul had heard that the Roman church was riddled with division and arrogance. If he were to have the support of the Roman church for his mission to Spain, he had to deal with all of these problems. Roman history helps us understand these issues. The Roman historian, Suetonius, notes that in 49 CE Claudius "expelled from Rome the Jews who were constantly stirring up a tumult under the leadership of Chrestus." The misspelled *Chrestus* likely refers to Christus (*Claudius*, 25) and was a reference to violent exchanges in the synagogues over Messiah Jesus and the Emperor's edict to restore order. After the expulsion, ethnic Gentiles remained in Rome unaffected by the edict while many Jewish Christians scattered to Mediterranean cities. For example, the Jewish believers, Aquila and Prisca, ended up with Paul in Corinth and Ephesus. After the death of Claudius in 54 CE, Nero lifted the ban, allowing Jews

to return to Rome. But the return of these Jewish Christians after five-plus years brought new tensions to the Roman churches. They observed special days and observed kosher or purity rules that seemed superstitious to some Gentile believers.

When Paul wrote Romans he was in Corinth as a guest of his former convert, Gaius, in the winter of 57–58 C.E. His Gentile gospel had come under fierce attack, and he was worried that news of those exchanges would reach Rome ahead of him and poison the atmosphere. So, if Romans sounds defensive, it was so because of Paul’s legitimate worry that his hopes of gaining the support of the Roman church for his Spanish mission were under threat. This study will encourage a reading of Romans that attends to those difficult problems and the sharp questions Paul faced about his apostolic legitimacy and the truth of his gospel.

While, the word “gospel” (Greek, *euangelion*), meaning good news, or glad tidings, is used elsewhere in the New Testament, Paul uses this word more than any other writer. He also uses the phrase, “my gospel” (Rom 2:16; 16:25). Clearly for Paul, gospel refers to God’s action in what he sees as history’s final climactic moment to reclaim a fallen world, to liberate humans from the clutches of evil, to reconcile the estranged, and to embrace believing Jew and Gentile in one glorious family marked by love and acceptance. As the good news spread in the early church Paul was pushing against an alternative understanding of gospel that did not focus, as did his version, on the centrality of the cross as a sign of God’s action to reclaim the world. (See Research activity #2.) Let us turn now to the opening of the letter at hand.

### **The Salutation**

Read **Romans 1:1–7**. Paul opens the letter by referring to his call to be an apostle (1:1), and then cites tradition to deflect the suspicion that his gospel was an outrageous novelty. In a long rambling sentence, he writes that he was “set apart for the gospel of God, . . . promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1:2–4). This appeal aimed to show that Paul’s apostleship was legitimate and that his gospel was faithful to the tradition.

## The Thanksgiving

The thanksgiving (read **Romans 1:8–15**) telegraphed a central concern of the letter—namely, Paul’s mission to the Gentiles. At the end of the thanksgiving Paul summarized the theme of the entire letter: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith’ ” (1:16–17). These verses contain Paul’s basic conviction that God’s final rule of righteousness was breaking in, and God was already in the process of reclaiming a world slipping out of control.

Romans as a whole should be read in light of Paul’s fundamental conviction and belief that he was living in the last days. Read **1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11**. It appears in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 that Paul expected the end within his lifetime. It is important not to get bogged down in the question of whether the apostle could have been wrong about the timing of the end. After all, it is now almost 2,000 years later and the end has not yet come. It is more important to understand what Paul’s thinking about the end would have meant to him and his converts, and the continuing value it has for us today.

## Key Words

Paul’s word “righteousness” is a key word. It refers not to a moral quality, as in goody two-shoes, but to God’s action. Like his Scriptures, Paul used the word to refer to God’s action on behalf of the weak, the marginal, the despised, the defenseless, and the *sinner*s. This action, begun in Jesus, was in process and would be completed at Jesus’ return. Paul believed, as Shakespeare expressed it, “the times are out of joint” and God had acted in Jesus to begin to set things right. In Jesus, God was in the process of making the crooked world straight. Already, in the death and resurrection of Christ, the process was beginning to unfold. Believing he was in the last days before God’s final rule and the vindication of the weak or sinners, Paul was eager to participate in the fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 2:1–4 when Gentiles would be included in God’s family of faith. Thus Paul proclaimed the “power of God for salvation to *everyone* who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (1:16). Read **Romans 1:16–17**.

While Paul nowhere defined the term “faith,” it carried many meanings for him—trust, fidelity, faithfulness, and the acceptance of being accepted. He went out of his way in his letter to emphasize that faith is not just belief that something is so, but also a way of life with a strong ethical imperative. Since many accused him of preaching a gospel of *cheap grace* that encouraged immorality, this last point was especially important. Like Abraham, a onetime Gentile (that is, uncircumcised), now also Greeks and barbarians, pagans and Gentiles may be included in God’s elect by faith.

## **Conclusion**

Paul wrote Romans to answer charges against his gospel that included Greeks and barbarians in the elect of God (1:14). He was concerned with more than just getting in with the elect and staying in. He was concerned with developing ways to include the excluded. He was working against the near-universal human tendency to be suspicious and afraid of those who are different. By underscoring the importance of his mission to the Gentiles, Paul placed himself and his readers at history’s climactic moment. On the basis of faith, God now was including the excluded, was opening the way for the inclusion of the *other* in the elect of God, and calling on the assemblies to pour less energy into erecting barriers between the insider and outsider, and to develop creative efforts that promoted mutual acceptance and love. Paul was profoundly hopeful that not only could the excluded be included, but also that Jews and Gentile believers could find a way for mutual acceptance and trust.

## **For Reflection and Further Study**

### ***Memory Bank***

Memorize Romans 1:16–17, about *faith* and *righteousness*.

### ***Reflection***

1. Can you think of instances in your own experience as a church when there has been fear of including those who are different? How was the issue discussed? How was it resolved, or was it resolved?
2. Can you think of instances in our own experience that parallel those Paul faced?

***Research***

1. Read Galatians 1–6 and consider its relationship to Paul’s theme of inclusion vs. exclusion. Galatians was written to a Gentile community about Gentile inclusion without the traditional Jewish identity markers, observance of the law, circumcision, etc.
2. In 2 Corinthians, Paul takes on an alternative understanding of the gospel. It seems that Corinthian converts tended to emphasize the resurrection, or success gospel, in a way that downplayed or ignored the cross. In 2 Corinthians, written prior to Galatians and Romans, Paul addresses opponents who emphasized a gospel of glory to the virtual exclusion of the cross. These messages did not focus, as did Paul’s writings, on the centrality of the cross as a sign of God’s action to reclaim the world. Read 2 Corinthians 11:23b-12:10 slowly and carefully to examine Paul’s detailed defense of the cross as an avenue through which God’s strength is manifest.