



**I have written to you rather boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. ROMANS 15:15–16**

## Salvation Offered to All People

**A**s Paul's longest and most developed writing, his monumental Letter to the Romans stands first in the church's collection of Paul's literary work. It has served to introduce Paul's thought to generations of readers and is recognized as his most influential and controversial work. At the time of the Reformation, the letter became a battleground for a Christianity being pulled apart. Ironically, a work that Paul intended to unify the church of his own day has been used as a wedge causing separation and division. Fortunately, a renewed understanding of Romans has led to ecumenical understanding and a deepening unity among Christians today.

When Paul penned this letter to "all God's beloved in Rome," he was writing to a church that he had neither founded nor as yet visited. Unlike his other letters, in which he wrote to communities who knew him well and addressed pastoral concerns of those churches, in his Letter to the Romans he addressed the Christians of a city he has never seen. Paul wrote in anticipation of his intended visit. He had carried out his task of preaching in the

eastern Mediterranean world, and now he was ready to undertake the proclamation of the gospel in the western half of that world. He hoped to make this political, military, and economic capital of the empire the base of his future mission. This letter serves as both his personal introduction to the church in Rome and an exposition of his developed understanding of the gospel.

The church in Rome, like most all the earliest churches of Christianity, was established by Jewish Christians. The synagogues provided the arena for evangelization. But several years before Paul's writing, trouble stirred among the Jews in Rome, and Claudius, the emperor from 41 to 54, expelled the Jewish population from the city (Acts 18:2). The Roman historian Suetonius states that Claudius "expelled Jews who were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus." Most historians believe that Suetonius misunderstood the Christian title of the Messiah, confusing Christus, the Latin name for Christ, with the more common name, Chrestus. It seems that this conflict between Jews and Jewish Christians over the status of Jesus as Messiah led to their banishment from Rome in the late 40s.

After the expulsion of the Jewish Christian leadership of the church in Rome, the Gentile Christians took the leadership positions and set up a church increasingly less influenced by the synagogue and concern for Jewish identity. This continued until the death of Claudius in 54, when many Jews returned to the capital city. The resulting tension between the Jewish and Gentile Christians seems to have been the occasion of Paul's letter. He wrote to explain his understanding of the equal relationship of Jews and Gentiles within the united People of God. He clarified to Jews that God's plan of salvation intended to include the Gentiles from the beginning, and he taught the Gentiles to respect the essential Jewish heritage of their faith.

Paul meant his letter to be read aloud to the community of believers while assembled at the house churches in Rome, intending that it be heard and understood by practicing Christians in the middle of the first century. For those who listened, Paul demonstrated how Gentiles can be incorporated with Jews into God's people without jeopardizing the continuity of salvation history. He shows that God desires salvation for people of all races and that salvation is offered, not through observing the precepts of the Torah, but by God's grace through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

### Reflection and Discussion

- What difficulties might Paul have encountered in writing to the Romans due to the fact that he had never personally visited the Christian community there?
- What might be some tensions between the Christian Jews and Gentiles? Why is Paul so concerned to bring unity between them?

### Sin, Grace, Law, and Faith

One of the things about which the Jewish and Gentile Christians were in complete agreement was the authority of Scripture—the Torah and the prophets—and its role in presenting God’s saving plan. For this reason, Paul expressed his understanding of the gospel by continual references to the Scriptures of Israel and God’s unfolding design. The prophets had communicated God’s promise of a final liberation, and now, in the gospel of Jesus Christ, God has spoken his final word and brought saving history to its climax.

Paul’s foundational premise is that all people are under the domination of sin: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (3:23). The opening stories of Genesis show that sin has been around for as long as humanity. It is not a part of the Creator’s design, but the result of human choice and failure. Sin dominates the human condition and is the cause of separation, alienation, division—from God, from others, and from oneself. It creates a destructive solidarity of sinners, from one generation to the next, making them slaves to the forces that oppose God and hindering them from being bearers of the

divine image. As Creator and Lord, God has every right to judge his human creation on the basis of its choices and behaviors, and divine wrath toward a disobedient creation is fully justified.

The only way that human creatures can be delivered from its addiction to sin is through something more powerful. Paul weighs what he says about sin against a power that he calls grace. This is God's merciful favor toward his people, which they have neither earned nor deserve. Grace is manifested in God's call and promises to Abraham, his choice of Israel, and most fully in the salvation of sinful human beings through Jesus Christ. Sin leads to death; grace leads to life. Paul proclaims the good news that "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (5:20–21).

Paul's exposition of human history divides it into two ages. Prior to Christ, humanity was under the power of sin, represented by the story of Adam's disobedience. All human beings are born into this sinfulness of humanity's Adam-like existence. But through the new birth of baptism, people are joined to Christ and his obedience. Adam and Christ are both archetypes for humanity's direction and possibilities: Adam through sin moves toward death; Christ through God's grace moves toward life. Rather than giving his creatures what they deserve, God looks with mercy on his creature's rebellion and offers them life.

Paul refers to "the law" as that set of regulations intended by God to guide Israel in its covenant with God. This law of Moses, Paul says, is "holy and just and good" (7:12). But this law has proved incapable of overcoming humanity's foundational problem, its slavery to sin. Telling the Jews to just obey the regulations of the Torah has become as futile as telling slaves to simply try harder. In fact, the good and holy law has fallen under the dominance of sin and has become its instrument. The law, then, intensifies the effects of whatever force holds sway over human beings, whether that force be sin or grace. As Paul explains, the law, which was intended to guide God's people, actually provokes people's tendency to resist the will of their Creator and arouses human desires toward sinfulness. In addition, the written law makes explicit the fact that sin is a clear rebellion against God, a transgression of his holy will, and thereby enhances the power of sin.

God desires to bring all people from the slavery of sin to the experience of grace in Jesus Christ. This offer of salvation must be accepted and received—by both Jews and Gentiles—through what Paul calls “faith” (*pistis*, in Greek). The word translated “faith” in most English versions of Scripture has a broad range of meanings. It includes belief, confidence, assurance, faithfulness, commitment, loyalty, and allegiance. For Paul, faith means the free commitment of oneself to God in Jesus Christ, the submission of one’s intellect and will to God.

Christian culture today offers lots of prepackaged ideas about the meaning of faith, law, works, and salvation that simplify and distort the full message of the New Testament. Statements like “I am saved because I trust in the blood of Jesus” or “Faith apart from works saves me” do not accurately summarize the gospel. In this letter, Paul leads his readers to a more robust understanding of Christian faith and its implication.

Faith and works are too often pitted against each other as opposite paths to salvation, one that is successful (faith) and one that fails (works). This division depends on partial and inaccurate meanings of faith and works. When Paul says, “we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law” (3:28), he is not speaking about good works in general, but works demanded by the law of Moses. He is demonstrating that both Jews and Gentiles are justified on the ground of the same faith.

Jews can no longer expect God’s saving grace simply by virtue of their race. Just living the precepts of the covenant cannot unbind a person from the reign of sin. And Gentiles should not be expected to become practicing Jews before they can experience salvation in Christ. No, for Jew and for Gentile, salvation is received by God’s grace through the act of faith.

Through a sincere search for Paul’s meaning in this letter, we discover that faith and works are not mutually exclusive after all. If salvation is through faith—understood as faithfulness, commitment, and allegiance to Jesus Christ—then the fatiguing discussion about whether we are saved by faith alone or by faith and works would no longer divide. With this understanding of faith, we realize how good works done in love are inseparable from a life lived in Christ. Through our honest study of Romans, perhaps Paul can again bring healing to our fractured Christianity.

### Reflection and Discussion

- Why is grace necessary for us to overcome sin?
- What does Paul mean by faith? How does this understanding overcome the divisive conflict between faith and works?

### What God Has Done for Humanity in Christ

Paul does not narrate the earthly ministry of Jesus, his preaching or his miracles. Rather, he teaches what God has done for humanity, both Jews and Gentiles, through the life, ministry, death, burial, resurrection, and enthronement of Christ. This work of God on our behalf is God's gift rooted in divine love: "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (5:8). This act of divine love is humanly inconceivable and contrary to all expectations. It is unconditional and independent of any worthiness or merit on our part. God's climactic and decisive action on behalf of humanity is God's free act of grace.

In describing what God has achieved for humanity in Christ, Paul makes use of several different images, each drawn from his own first-century background. Each image expresses a distinct facet of Christ's climactic work and the effects offered to all people. Here is a brief description of each of these images that will appear throughout Paul's letter:

*Justification.* This is the primary image Paul uses in Romans, expressing the new relationship between human beings and God because of the work of Christ. Justification is a judicial term designating the effect created on those who stand acquitted or vindicated before a judge's tribu-

nal. In relationship to God, sinners stand justified before God because of the work of Christ. People are able to accept and receive this act of grace from God, not through their observance of the precepts of the Mosaic law, but through their response of faith, through faithfulness to Christ and baptism in him. We can stand before God acquitted because we are justified by grace through faith. As Paul says, we are “now justified by his grace” (3:24), and “he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus” (3:26).

*Salvation.* This image expresses rescue from harm and deliverance from evil. Throughout the Scriptures, God saved his people from harm and evil that was physical and spiritual, internal and external, personal and communal. In introducing his letter, Paul describes the gospel as “the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith” (1:16). He teaches that we have been saved through Christ’s death and resurrection, yet the full effects of our salvation will be experienced in the future. Salvation is an ongoing process that culminates in a glorious future. Paul urges us to be confident in this process as he shows that justification and salvation are two different facets of what God has done for us: “Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God” (5:9).

*Reconciliation.* This image designates a change in relationship, from one of hostility and alienation to one of friendship and intimacy. When Paul uses this image, he speaks of God reconciling people to himself through Christ, bringing sinners from estrangement to closeness. This reconciliation puts us on the way to salvation, as Paul says: “For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life” (5:10). This reconciliation unites the world back to God, it recovers a lost wholeness and integrity, and it creates again a right relationship between the Creator and creatures.

*Adoption.* This process for transferring an enslaved or abandoned child into the family of another became an image for God’s relationship with

Israel. An adopted child received the sense of belonging to the family and an inheritance. As Paul applies this image to the lives of believers, he describes adoption as God's gift, uniting us to his Son through the Spirit: "You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption" (8:15). This adoption makes us children of God and enables us to acknowledge our adoption by crying out to God, "Abba! Father!" As children, we become heirs in God's family. With Christ we become joint heirs, inheriting all of God's blessings.

*Redemption.* Paul drew this image from the practice of emancipation of prisoners and slaves. An Israelite who bought back a kinsman who was held captive or enslaved was known as a redeemer. The prophets and psalms describe God as Israel's Redeemer, who freed his people from the bondage of Egypt and the captivity of Babylon. Paul applies this image to Christ when he speaks of the redemption that is in Christ. He even speaks of redemption in a cosmic sense: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves...groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (8:22–23).

*Atonement.* This imagery from ancient Israel refers to God's pardon of sin through offering sacrifice. Paul understands the cross of Jesus and the shedding of his blood as a sacrifice of atonement. The sacrifice of Christ has achieved for humanity all that the Day of Atonement ritual symbolized each year as it was enacted in Jerusalem's temple (Lev 16). Paul expresses what God has done for all sinful people, using the images of justification, redemption, and atonement: "They are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith" (3:24–25).

*Sanctification.* This image comes from Israel's Torah and prophets, where people and things were often referred to as "holy," that is, set apart from the profane world and marked out for God's service. For Paul, Christ is the means whereby believers are made holy, that is, sanc-



tified or made saints. In Romans he says, “Now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life” (6:22). Sanctification expresses the separation of Christians from a fully secular life to devote themselves to the service of God.

*Glorification.* The Scriptures of Israel speak of the perceptible manifestation of God’s presence as divine “glory.” For Paul, glory expresses the destiny of Christian believers. “We boast,” he says, “in our hope of sharing the glory of God” (5:2). Not only will we reflect divine glory, but we will share the glory of God, bearing the full image and likeness of God as our Creator intends. Paul encourages the struggling community in Rome, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us” (8:18). Being glorified by God is presented as the culminating effect of God’s saving work in those who put their faith in Christ Jesus (8:30). We trust God completely to finish the work of our salvation and bring us to the glory he has promised.

With all of these various images, drawn from the background of both Jews and Gentiles, Paul describes what God has done for humanity through Jesus Christ. In a city dominated by the cult of the Roman emperor, God offers new and eternal life to those who place their trust and allegiance in God’s Messiah and Lord.

### **Reflection and Discussion**

- Why does Paul use such a variety of images to express what God has done for us in Christ?

- These various images refer to both our present and future existence in Christ? Which do I experience most at present and which do I anticipate most in the future?

### **Reading Paul's Letter to the Romans**

Because Paul was a Jew who formerly persecuted Christians and since he was known throughout the eastern world as the Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul recognized that suspicions about his teachings had undoubtedly reached the city of Rome. He also knew that the tensions within the church there between Jewish and Gentile Christians had resulted in misunderstanding and division. Because of these circumstances and since Paul hoped to soon make his first visit to Rome, Paul wrote this letter in order to introduce himself and to clarify for the Christians of Rome how Jews and Gentiles are equally included in God's saving plan and should be united in faith and worship within the church.

Paul had to explain the gospel in such a way that it would be accepted by Jews and Gentiles alike. For this reason, he establishes his teachings on the Torah and prophets of Israel, showing how the new and final era of salvation history has begun in Christ. He shows how God is faithful to his promises, which was essential for Jewish Christians, but he also affirms the universality of those promises, which was necessary for the Gentiles.

Paul's letter is not an abstract work of theology. It is written in the context of his own intentions and the struggles of the people to whom he wrote. This understanding is a great benefit for the modern reader in interpreting the text. In this light, we will divide the letter into four quarters: Rom 1—4, Rom 5—8, Rom 9—11, and Rom 12—16.

In the opening chapter, Paul introduces himself and his purpose for writing. He praises his audience and makes clear that his focus is "the gospel," to

which he has dedicated his life. He describes the gospel as “the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith” (1:16). Wanting to lead “everyone” to salvation, he intends to explain how all people can belong to Jesus Christ. But he sets this purpose aside for a while because, first, he will demonstrate that all of humanity needs salvation because the reign of sin is universal. Rom 2 spotlights how the Jewish people are accountable to God for sin, and Rom 3 widens the light to detail the guilt of all people. Paul then begins to show the way out, the path of salvation. Human beings cannot be right with God through their own merits, but by squarely facing their sin and appealing to God’s grace in the saving work of Jesus Christ. Rom 4 presents the example of Abraham to show that God’s promises are realized, not by obedience to the law, but by faithfulness to God.

The next section of the letter contrasts life under the domination of sin, represented by Adam, and life dominated by grace, brought about by Christ. Rom 5 presents the hope of glory that is ours in Christ and the movement toward salvation. Rom 6 describes the victory of grace over the bondage of sin, and Rom 7 describes the triumph of grace over the power of the law. As humanity becomes convinced of its need for a savior, God’s grace draws believers into a loyal union with Christ. Paul’s climactic words in Rom 8 assure us that we can face all adversity through the love of God manifested in Christ and received through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul devotes Rom 9–11 to explaining the relationship of Israel to the gospel. He praises God’s promises and faithfulness to Israel, yet acknowledges his perplexity that the gospel has fared worse among Jews than among Gentiles. He then explains how Israel’s rejection of the gospel has opened the way for the Gentiles to share in their inheritance. The remnant of Jews who have accepted Jesus as Messiah provides an assurance that, eventually, “all Israel will be saved” (11:26). Finally, Paul assures his listeners that God will demonstrate his mercy to the chosen people because “the gift and the calling of God are irrevocable” (11:29).

The last chapters of Paul’s letter present the practical ramifications of the gospel. In Rom 12, Paul urges the Christian community to present their lives as a “living sacrifice to God,” using their gifts to benefit one another. Paul pleads for unity in the church, asking his listeners to refrain from judging others, to look to the good of others, and to imitate Christ’s acceptance of

Jews and Gentiles. In Rom 15, Paul states his mission to continue establishing churches, his desire to visit Rome, and his request for their prayers. In the final chapter, Paul sends personal greetings to Christians in Rome, whom he calls his “co-workers,” and concludes with a prayer of praise to God.

While we must keep in mind Paul’s theological, pastoral, and missionary purpose when reading Romans, we must also keep in mind our own context today when reading this work. We are living in an age in which the evil that surrounds us may cause us to lose hope. Paul’s letter offers us a confident trust that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

### **Reflection and Discussion**

- What aspects of the church in Rome are important to keep in mind in order to understand Paul’s letter?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- What aspects of my own context today make me more open and eager to read this letter?

### **Prayer**

*Lord God, you called Paul to be your apostle and to proclaim your gospel to the people of the ancient world. Prepare my mind and heart to receive these inspired words of Paul as I read his Letter to the Romans. Show me how to meditate on these words each day so that they lead me to prayer. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, stir up in me a desire to respond to these words and allow them to transform my life. Keep me faithful these weeks to the challenges of study and prayer that your word offers to me.*