

Romans: The World's Most Influential Letter

Introduction Lesson Notes: Overview

Focus Verse

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile." (Romans 1:16)

Outline

- The Influence of Romans
- The Background of Romans
- An Overview of Romans

Engage

People everywhere long for connection and community, yet division often dominates our world. Differences in political views and theological perspectives often create tension and break relationships. Crime and corruption go unchecked, and tolerance is demanded—but only for what is popular. Those who follow Christ are often mocked and marginalized.

These challenges are not new. When Paul wrote from Corinth to the early Christians in Rome, they faced similar struggles. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Paul penned one of the most influential letters ever written—the book of Romans. In it, Paul explained the good news of Jesus and how the salvation He offers changes everything. The gospel has the power to bring all people from guilt to grace. As we begin this new year studying God's Word, we will discover how Romans speaks to life's biggest questions and deepest difficulties. It teaches us about salvation, grace, and the new life we have in Christ. **Romans explains timeless, essential truths for today and eternity.**

The Influence of Romans

Throughout the centuries, Paul's letter to the Romans has changed countless lives, transformed diverse cultures, and impacted history. The great Bible translator William Tyndale said of this epistle that no one "can read it too often, or study it too well." Martin Luther's friend Philip Melancthon copied the book of Romans twice by hand because he wanted to take its message to heart. The impact of this great book endures today.

Augustine (AD 354-430)

Augustine, a brilliant and gifted man, lived an immoral life that greatly disappointed his Christian mother. Just like many people today, sin held Augustine in a vice-like grip. One day, while in a

friend's garden, Augustine heard a child singing the words "take and read." He understood this as a message from God and obeyed. He rushed to the other end of the garden, where a copy of the Bible lay. Opening it at random, he read from Romans 13, "Let us behave decently, as in the daytime. ... Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh."¹ **God's Word spoke exactly what Augustine needed.** His response to God's Word surpassed his mother's earnest desire and heartfelt prayers. Augustine came to faith in Christ and became a leading theologian whose influence was extensive.

Martin Luther (AD 1483-1546)

Unlike Augustine, Martin Luther served as a pious, earnest monk—an apparent Christian. But peace eluded him. Luther wanted to please and be accepted by God. Yet, the harder he worked, the more unattainable his soul's salvation seemed. Instead of growing closer to God, Luther felt increasingly distanced from Him. He reasoned that God required a humanly impossible and unattainable standard of righteousness. Luther found himself hating the very God he should love. In desperation, Luther turned to study Paul's letter to the Romans and found his sought-after solution in 1:17: "For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'" As God revealed the meaning of this verse to him, Luther realized his need for righteousness from God alone. **God's righteousness could not be gained through Luther's own works but only by faith in Christ.** Luther took God's Word to heart and believed in Him. Submitting to this truth, Martin Luther, who became a pillar of the Protestant Reformation, taught that every believer should know Romans well and read the book daily, word for word. His personal, transformative encounter with the book of Romans still profoundly impacts the world today.

The Relevance of Romans Today

People in our skeptical, rapidly changing world today sometimes challenge or scoff at testimonies such as Luther's or Augustine's. While circumstances may have changed, people have not. More importantly, God has not changed. **Jesus Christ and His gospel remain the most powerful force in history.** The book of Romans presents profound truths that bring blessing, spiritual revival, and transformation.

The Background of Romans

Author and Place

Formerly named as Saul,² Paul identified himself as Christ's servant, an apostle set apart for God.³ A Jew and a Roman citizen, Paul hailed from Tarsus, a Greek city. Later in life, Paul demonstrated that he was well acquainted with Greek literature and culture.⁴ As a child, Paul received a Jewish education in Jerusalem that also likely influenced his intellectual development. Descended from Pharisees, Paul trained under the renowned Rabbi Gamaliel.⁵

1. **Clothing of Christ:** Romans 13:13-14

2. **Saul:** Acts 7:57–8:1; 9:1-31; 13:9

3. **Servant of Christ:** Romans 1:1

4. **Tarsus and Greek life:** Acts 17:16-23, 28; 21:39

5. **Paul, a Pharisee:** Acts 22:3; 23:6

God's Word and Paul's Letter

The Doctrine of the Bible

The book of Romans is a letter written by the apostle Paul to first-century believers in Rome. As one of the 66 books of the Bible, Romans is God's powerful Word. Inspired by the Holy Spirit of God, more than 40 human writers authored the Holy Scriptures. **God's Word, recorded long ago, offers timeless truth for yesterday, today, and eternity.**

The Bible is God's true and living Word, the written revelation of God Himself. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible tells God's story—one of salvation through Jesus Christ. Because God cannot lie or make mistakes, the Bible's original manuscripts present absolute truth. Applicable today and throughout history, the Holy Scriptures lead and guide God's people. Every Old Testament prophecy concerning Jesus's first coming came to pass. The prophecies regarding His return to earth at the end of the age remain just as certain. Given hope through God's promises, believers await Jesus's return and the fulfillment of prophecy.

Those who fail to recognize the Bible as God's true, inerrant Word regard Scripture as just another book. Considering the encounters of God's ancient people as fantastical stories or God Himself as a fictional character is a grave error. God has revealed who He really is—the one true, sovereign, almighty, holy, everlasting, creator God, who rules and reigns over all. People who are indifferent toward or have disdain for the Bible trust in themselves and rely on their limited power. Without the Bible as an anchor, the conclusions of academic scholars and humanity's most brilliant minds leave people greatly wanting.

Believing God's truth, revealed in the Bible, deeply grounds the life of every believer.

Through His Word, God provides true comfort for pain and helpful guidance for life's confusion. Believers open the Bible to seek and find eternal truths that provide a framework for every circumstance they face. We learn to trust God more each time we read His Word and take it to heart. Our strength grows as God's truth stretches and challenges us. God's Spirit helps His people understand God's Word and shapes us into the likeness of Jesus, who loves us and will never leave us. Do you long to understand God more deeply and be more like Jesus—every time you read God's Word?

Paul became a zealous Pharisee⁶ who classified Christians as heretics. His extreme persecution of believers⁷ ended abruptly. One day, as Paul traveled to Damascus, he met Jesus, and his life changed forever.⁸

Paul most likely wrote to the Romans from the city of Corinth. Most scholars suggest that the apostle arrived in Corinth one winter, sometime during AD 55-57, about 25 years after Jesus was crucified and resurrected. Paul stayed three months in Corinth⁹ before traveling to Jerusalem.

6. **Paul's zealotness:** Galatians 1:14; Philippians 3:4-5

7. **Persecution by Paul:** Acts 8:1-3; 22:3-5; Galatians 1:13; Philippians 3:6

8. **Road to Damascus:** Acts 9:1-22

9. **Paul in Corinth:** Acts 20:1-3

Prompting and Purpose

Christianity in Rome probably originated with travelers to and from the great city who communicated the gospel message. Some of those believers may have been among the gathering on Pentecost—the day the Holy Spirit powerfully descended upon God’s people.¹⁰ Rome’s church, a growing community of believers, consisted mostly of Gentiles. Perhaps this is one reason Paul longed to visit Rome. **Paul sought a harvest among the Roman Gentiles.**¹¹ He desired to stop in Rome on his way to Spain to fellowship, encourage believers, and receive assistance.¹² Paul needed this influential church’s partnership to share the gospel in Rome and beyond.

In his missionary letter, the book of Romans, Paul focused on God’s provision of righteousness for Jews and Gentiles in the universal Church of Jesus Christ. He repeatedly pointed to humanity’s sinful spiritual condition before a holy God. **God alone is righteous.** All people, all nations, Jew and Gentile, share the same great need—the righteousness only God can give. Romans paints a glorious picture of God’s reconciliation of sinful people to Himself through Christ. The direct application of this truth is profound: United under the gospel, Jews and Gentiles can worship God in harmony with one another. This rich theology flowed from God through Paul’s heart as a pastor, a missionary, and a wretched sinner rescued by Christ.¹³

■ An Overview of Romans

Human Unrighteousness – 1:1–3:20

Romans begins with words of hope before plunging into humanity’s dire condition apart from God. The first three chapters contain a perceptive analysis of human nature in relationship to God.

A Personal Word from Paul (1:1-15) – Paul’s opening words point to his central message: “the gospel of God.” Gospel means “good news.” At the center of the gospel is God’s Son, Jesus Christ, and His saving work for all humankind on the cross. **The superlatively good news announced by Paul comes from God.**

The Letter’s Theme (1:16-17) – **The gospel is God’s revelation of His righteousness that comes to believers by faith, apart from human works.** The gospel holds God’s power to transform lives. Without God’s power, we cannot live as God designed us to live. No one can please God by hard work or a moral life. God’s people need only rest in the finished work of Jesus Christ, who lived, died, and rose on our behalf.

Human Rejection of God and God’s Wrath Against Humanity (1:18-32) – Paul clarified that the intricacies and beauty of God’s entire created world prove to people that He exists. **Creation should draw people to seek God.** Instead, people wrongly worship what God created rather than God, the Creator. God punishes this willful and rebellious ignorance by giving people over to their sins. The lives of irreligious people, who reject God, show that sin’s power holds them. Apart from God, the spiritual outworking of sin drags humanity downward, enslaving them in invisible chains.

10. Spirit’s power: Acts 2:1-11

11. Harvest among Gentiles: Romans 1:13

12. Paul’s plan: Romans 15:23-24

13. Wretched before Christ: Romans 7:24-25

Romans: A Brief Outline

The following simple outline will help with grasping the teachings of Romans:

- Romans 1:1–3:20—Humanity’s unrighteousness and great need of true righteousness
- Romans 3:21–8:39—God’s gracious gift of righteousness through Jesus Christ
- Romans 9–11—Proof of God’s righteousness in His sovereign plan
- Romans 12–16—God’s righteousness worked out in His people’s lives

No Excuse for Sin (2:1–3:20) – The tragedy of sin involves all people. This includes moral people and the piously religious. Moral people fail to live up to the higher moral standards they claim to embrace. Piously religious people (in Paul’s day, Jews) stubbornly refuse to believe in Jesus as Messiah—their only hope for reconciliation with God. Outward conformity to human laws in their own strength does not prove godliness and cannot change human hearts.

God’s Gracious Gift of Righteousness – 3:21–8:39

In this portion, Paul’s letter moves forward to cover the work of Christ on behalf of those who believe. **Paul takes his readers through the full scope of God’s provision from justification by faith (being declared righteous before God) to sanctification (the ongoing process of being made holy by God.)**

Salvation from God Alone (3:21–31) – Now the gospel’s good news makes its glorious entry. Sin’s grasp firmly holds every sinner. People remain unable to do good, understand the gospel, or seek and find God. But God took the initiative to offer salvation to the world. **Through Jesus Christ and His work on the cross, God provides the righteousness human beings lack.** He did this not only for Jews, who might expect it, but for Gentiles as well.

Proof from the Old Testament (4:1–25) – Paul cited Old Testament examples to demonstrate that faith has always been God’s means to save sinners. Abraham, Israel’s founding patriarch, and David, Israel’s beloved king, looked forward in faith to Christ’s coming. Before the cross, all who believed God and looked forward in faith to the Messiah received God’s righteousness, even if the details were not fully understood. **Believers today look back to the cross for salvation, united by the gospel and God’s unchanging path to salvation.**

Justified by Faith, First Results (5:1–11) – Now justified by God through faith, God’s beloved children receive new privileges. His Spirit sanctifies and molds us into His character. He provides a previously unknown peace with God and foundation for peace with others and with circumstances. Certain of their eternal destiny, believers can bear suffering with hearts that rejoice in every situation and trust God fully.

Union with Jesus Christ (5:12-6:23) – Paul began to describe the profound results of God’s work of salvation. **God not only justifies and redeems, but He also sanctifies believers to do His will.** Once saved, believers belong to the living Lord Jesus Christ for eternity. We no longer live for sin, which leads to condemnation and death. Instead, we step forward with Christ and live for His righteousness. This is entirely because of God’s great grace, His undeserved favor.

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Believers and God’s Law (7:1-25) – Human attempts to obey God’s law will ultimately fail. Paul used his own personal struggles to prove that human efforts toward moral uprightness cannot measure up to God’s holy standard. **Justification by grace through faith releases believers from the law’s demands.** This does not mean God’s law lacks value. The law expresses God’s perfect, holy character and reveals sinful humanity’s need for a Savior.

Justified by Faith, Final Victory (8:1-39) – **God’s work in Christ accomplished the law’s righteous requirements.** Sin threatens defeat, but God began His good work in all who believe and will continue that work to the end. Paul draws our gaze to God, who provides victory over sin by the Holy Spirit’s power. He closed this section with God’s glorious promise that nothing in heaven or on earth can ever separate God’s children from His inexpressible love and power.

God’s Righteous Plan – 9–11

As Paul continued with his theme of believers’ security in Christ, he turned to the question of how unbelieving Israel fits into God’s long-term plan. He stated that sin traps Jews and Gentiles alike. **Christ alone saves sinners and gives eternal salvation.** God will never deny His Son’s work on the cross. All believers are united with Christ for eternity. Some may ask, “What about God’s ancient people? What about Jewish people who have rejected Jesus Christ?” Paul answered that God has not broken faith with Israel. God will call many in Israel back to Him one day, showing that God keeps the commitments He makes to us in salvation. He is the same covenant-keeping God yesterday, today, and forever. God’s steadfast love endures forever.

The Sovereignty of God (9:1-29) – With Israel as an example, God has never saved anyone based on heritage, status, or works. Instead, He calls people to salvation because of His sovereign purpose and gracious promises. Human effort, family ties, and national identity cannot save. God saves no one based on church attendance, high moral standards, or generous gifts. Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. **Salvation cannot be earned by human effort or accomplishment.**

Jewish Unbelief (9:30–10:21) – Salvation is God’s work that flows from His plan and activity. This does not excuse people from personal responsibility for their unbelief or rebellious actions. **All who fail to believe in the gospel of salvation through Christ are responsible for their own personal choice.** God does not create unbelief, though He understands, foretells, and works through it. Praise God that human failure is not the end of the story.

“All Israel Will Be Saved” (11:1-32) – God works to save sinners. God worked through the rejection of Jesus by most of His chosen people to reach the Gentiles with the gospel. **God also uses the Gentiles’ embrace of the gospel to provoke Israel to jealousy, so that He may do a great work among them too.** In the process, God will keep promises He made to Israel, showing He keeps His word to us about deliverance for those who embrace Him. Paul offered a triumphant conclusion: “In this way, all Israel will be saved.”¹⁴

The Meaning of History (11:33-36) – Ultimately, history is God’s story—the story of Jesus and God’s choice of Israel for Himself. **God works in all things to perfect and glorify His people so they can live with Him forever.** This tremendous thought caused Paul to burst out in glorious praise to God in one of Scripture’s greatest doxologies.

God’s Righteousness Applied – 12–16

Paul, a pastor and missionary, considered biblical doctrine a practical tool for right living. His teachings always apply to real life. **In the final chapters of Romans, Paul traced the gospel’s work in the real-life details of individuals, churches, and nations.** Paul’s point is that only saving faith in Christ can make a difference that brings lasting positive change in a person, a community, or the world.

A Christian’s Worship, Service, and Love (12:1-21) – With God’s mercy in view, Paul calls believers to go into the world as living sacrifices with renewed minds. Our thoughts directly influence our actions. **With minds focused on God’s Word, believers are to put on Christlike thinking and live transformed lives.** A lack of genuine concern for God and His ways leads people away from Christ and to lives lacking in loving, sacrificial, God-glorifying behavior. This is evident throughout every age, including today. For believers, right thinking begins with a proper view of God, self, and others. As humans, we often hold an opinion of ourselves that is too high or too low. God has gifted every believer to enrich the entire body of Christ. Our response should be to love and serve God and others with the gifts He bestows on us. We are to think more about others and less about ourselves.

Transformed by the Holy Spirit and looking toward Jesus’s future return, believers are commanded to wake from their slumber and live holy lives of love in ways that shine the light of Christ.

A Christian’s Relationship to Governing Authorities (13:1-7) – Paul and the Christians of his day lived under a hostile and oppressive government, yet Paul insisted that believers submit to governing authorities. **Romans unfolds the proper God-given role of a secular state and tells how Christians should live.** These principles remain extremely helpful for understanding the social and political responsibilities of believers today.

Living in the Last Days (13:8-14) – **God’s people are to live in the present with their eyes fixed heavenward.** Transformed by the Holy Spirit and looking toward Jesus’s future return, believers are commanded to wake from their slumber and live holy lives of love in ways that shine the light of Christ.

14. All Israel will be saved: Romans 11:26

The Responsibility of Strong Christians for Weaker Christians (14:1–15:13) – Paul used the conflict around Torah observance to speak to Christians’ responsibility to one another in times of disagreement, especially concerning Christian liberty in disputable matters. **Paul revealed how to preserve unity through kindness and Christlike love for one another.** Because God has accepted us in Christ, Paul compels us to accept all other Christians. Mature believers should seek to encourage and help those who are new in faith rather than look down on them.

Paul’s Future Plans and Final Greetings (15:14–16:27) – This final section reminds us once more that Romans is a letter. Paul gave glory to God alone, saying, “I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me.” **Paul sent personal greetings and expressed his hopes to visit Rome after he traveled to Jerusalem.** His letter concludes with a simple yet powerful benediction.

Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome provides a foundation upon which people in every age can build their lives. The presentation of the gospel in Paul’s letter to Rome’s believers provides a firm foundation for believers throughout the ages. **Romans explains timeless, essential truth for today and eternity.** We can anticipate God’s blessings as we study this letter—inspired by God and sent to us through Paul.

Take to Heart

Hold Fast

Romans reveals human sin against the backdrop of God’s holiness. Sin’s downward spiral leads people away from God, their Creator. Understanding humanity’s entirely helpless and desperate state helps us understand our greatest need—the righteousness only God can give. **God provided His solution to human hopelessness: the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.** Those who trust in Christ’s saving work are no longer condemned sinners.

Salvation does not just look back but also looks forward; believers are not only saved by Christ but also transformed to live for Him. **Paul’s letter to Roman believers takes us beyond the good news of the gospel to explain how redeemed people live.** First and foremost, God’s people recognize the greatness and wonder of God Himself. We present ourselves to God as living sacrifices, seeking His transforming power to permeate every part of our lives. Believers live with an eye on this world and a steady focus on eternal matters. Because God provided the way to reverse sin’s death penalty, He leads His people to live with passion for Christ in all they say and do. When we mirror who God is, we live as light amid darkness and help others to find their way to Him.

Apply It

Paul unmistakably revealed the truth of humanity’s sinful state—absolutely no one is righteous before God.¹⁵ Without God’s intervention, we are doomed and face a tragic future—accountable to God and guilty before Him.¹⁶ Human effort futilely attempts to bridge the gap between sin and our holy God. Most people fail to recognize the eternal danger they are in apart from Christ. Have you consciously considered the chasm sin creates between you and God? We will not

¹⁵. **No one seeks God:** Romans 3:10-12

¹⁶. **Accountable to God:** Romans 3:19

seek God without a deep understanding of the gravity of our sin. What keeps you from facing the truth about all the ways your thoughts, words, and actions do not meet God's righteous standards? How might God be leading you to face your sinfulness, acknowledge specific sin, and confess that sin with a repentant heart? We prefer to believe we are OK with God if we have not committed murder or other terrible sins. However, God wants us to face the truth about our own sinfulness. What next steps will you take to repent, seek Christ, and surrender to Him?

No doubt, sin separates us from God. However, God does not leave us without hope. Romans presents God's great solution to the problem of human sin. **There is no condemnation for those who believe and trust in Jesus.**¹⁷ No condemnation! No guilt, no shame, no fear of God's wrath! Let these words flow from the page to your heart. If you are a believer, how deeply have you thought about or understood that you face no condemnation? For all who believe, Jesus took sin's condemnation upon Himself when He was nailed to the cross. Are you thankful to God for sending Jesus to pay the price for your sin? What does Jesus's sacrifice on the cross mean to you personally? Perhaps, as you read these words, you have questions. Maybe you do not yet believe or do not consider yourself a believer. Know that these words are also for you. Will you make today the day you profess faith in Jesus as your Lord and Savior? With condemnation gone forever, we can live as God originally designed us to live as His children, reflecting Him. Salvation moves us from fear of judgment to freedom of living in grace!

The truth Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome proves as relevant today as in ancient times. How will you aim to take these truths to heart as you study this year? **A true understanding of God's Word, including the book of Romans, is reserved for all who search with open hearts.** God promises to fill those who diligently seek Him with righteousness.¹⁸ Though the profound teaching in this book is deeper and richer than we can fully comprehend, trust the Holy Spirit to help you grasp eternal truth in new and fresh ways. As we seek God through His Word, we discover His amazing grace. We come to love and trust Him more and more. As a result, He deepens our faith and transforms our lives. How will you approach your study of Romans? How will you be intentional to read expectantly and search this book honestly, humbly, obediently, and prayerfully? Paul's letter to the Romans has transformed people, churches, and even nations for more than two millennia. The gospel of Christ powerfully unites people across backgrounds, differences, and divergences in Christ, all to the glory of God. We can confidently study this book, knowing that God always honors and keeps His Word. He will use our study of Romans to renew our minds and transform our lives, making us more like the Savior, who has redeemed us by His grace.

17. **No condemnation:** Romans 8:1

18. **Hunger and thirst for righteousness:** Matthew 5:6

