

# BOOK OF ROMANS INTRODUCTION

## IN THE GOSPEL THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD IS REVEALED

**“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.’” (Romans 1:17)**

### **Author, Date and Place of Writing**

Apostle Paul wrote the letter to the Romans (1:1), with Tertius serving as his amanuensis (16:22). It was written during his third missionary journey, around A.D. 57., most likely while he was in Corinth (Ac 20:2-3). At that time, Paul was on the way to Jerusalem to deliver a relief offering for the poor believers there, which had been collected in Macedonia and Achaia (15:25-26).

Paul identifies himself as **“a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God...”** (1:1). Understanding this helps us know why he wrote the book of Romans. It is worthwhile to consider who Paul was and how he came to be an apostle for the Gentiles. He was born and raised as a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, in Tarsus. He was a Roman citizen by birth. He studied under the rabbi Gamaliel in Jerusalem and was thoroughly trained in the law as a Pharisee, the strictest sect in Judaism (Ac 22:3; 26:5). He was advancing in Judaism beyond many of his own age among his people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of his fathers (Gal 1:14). He strongly believed that the only way of attaining the righteousness of God was in keeping the law. He said that as to legalistic righteousness he was faultless (Php 3:6). To him, believing in Jesus who was crucified as the Messiah, was a stumbling block (1Co 1:23). It seemed to destroy the hope of Israel and caused people to abandon keeping the law as the way of righteousness. Paul regarded Christianity as such a serious threat that it would lead the whole nation astray, and it seemed to be spreading like wildfire. He thought that it should be eradicated as a matter of life and death. He was so obsessed with persecuting Christians that he tried to destroy the church of God (Gal 1:13). On the authority of the chief priest, he put many of the Lord’s people in prison and to death (Ac 26:10).

Once, Paul was on the way to Damascus to hunt down Christians. He saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around him and his companions. They all fell to the ground, and he heard a voice saying to him in Aramaic, **“Saul,**

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**Saul why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads”** (Ac 26:13-14). When he asked, **“Who are you, Lord?”** he was told, **“I am Jesus whom you are persecuting”** (Ac 9:5; 26:15). Paul realized that Jesus was not just a dead ringleader, but the Risen Christ and the glorious Son of God. Instead of being punished for his terrible sins, Paul was forgiven and received Jesus’ calling as an apostle to the Gentiles (Ac 9:15-18; 26:16-18). Paul experienced God’s grace; he was justified simply by faith in Christ and made right with God. Through this encounter with the Risen Jesus he was completely changed. Right away he began to preach that Jesus is the Son of God (Ac 9:20). Later he confessed, **“Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst”** (1Ti 1:13-15).

Paul received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith (1:5). He was especially prepared to be the apostle to the Gentiles, set apart by God from the womb (Gal 1:15). He is the only apostle who grew up outside of Israel, and was familiar with a Gentile context. Furthermore, his experience with the Risen Christ is typical for those who did not know Jesus on earth. And Paul’s intense training as a Pharisee equipped him with a knowledge of the Scriptures. Then, when God revealed his Son in Paul, he was enlightened to understand all of Scripture from Christ’s perspective (Gal 1:16). Most likely, when Paul spent three years in Arabia, he studied the Scriptures newly, came to understand them more deeply and preached the gospel boldly to the Gentiles everywhere (Gal 1:17). This offended the Jews and they severely persecuted Paul. But he defended the truth of the gospel and protected Gentile believers as a matter of life and death (Gal 2:5). While struggling like this, Paul wrote Romans reflecting his own faith and experience. That is why it has been called, “the autobiography of a man who has been justified by faith.”<sup>1</sup>

## Literary Features

Romans is an epistle which includes a salutation, thanksgiving, body, personal greetings and benediction. Especially the body of the letter distinguishes it from other epistles. The body is systematically constructed to explain the

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick F. Bruce, *Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 45.

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meaning of the gospel and how it applies. It is also a defense of the gospel using rhetorical questions and answers in conversation with hypothetical opponents. It is Paul's treatise on the gospel.

## Recipients

In 1:7a, Paul clearly addresses his recipients: **“To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people.”** Preceding phrases, such as, **“all the Gentiles”** and **“you also are among those Gentiles”** imply that most recipients were Gentiles (1:5-6). Paul addresses the Gentiles specifically in one part of his letter (11:13). It is likely that the churches in Rome had become predominantly Gentile after Emperor Claudius had expelled all Jews from Rome in A.D. 49 (Ac 18:2). When Paul wrote Romans, some Jews had returned to the city. In chapter 16, we find the names of specific Jewish converts to Christ (16:3,7,11). We can infer that the church in Rome was a mixture of Jewish and Gentile believers. These believers were meeting in house churches throughout Rome. We know very little about how they started, but Paul was aware of them and knew many believers by name (16:1-16). Most likely, this letter was circulated among them.

## Occasion and Purpose of Writing

Paul planned to visit Rome many times (1:13). It was the capital city of the vast Roman Empire, which included Italy, North Africa, Greece and Macedonia, western and northern Europe, Egypt and much of the Middle East (see map). In Paul's time, the Empire was relatively stable politically, and thriving economically. Massive infrastructure was developed, including highways enhancing international travel. The worldwide use of Greek facilitated communication. Strategically speaking, to evangelize Rome was a key step to reach the whole world with the gospel. It was Paul's great vision to fulfill Jesus' world salvation purpose through the believers in Rome (1:15). This vision was conceived after Paul experienced the mighty work of God in Ephesus. He said, **“After I have been there [Jerusalem], I must visit Rome also”** (Ac 19:21). Paul was not a founder of the church at Rome, nor had he visited there. But he prayed for the Roman believers constantly, with gratitude, and wanted to strengthen them in faith and plant a sense of world mission (1:8-11). At the same time, he seems to be aware of some problems in the Roman church, including being ashamed of the gospel (1:16), intolerance among believers (14:1; 15:1), and danger from divisive elements (16:17). Paul was

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compelled to deal with these problems. Since he was hindered from visiting in person, he wrote a letter to them. Interestingly, it seems that no apostle had been to Rome, so they needed an apostle's teaching.

Throughout this letter, Paul stated his purposes in writing. First, he wanted to impart a spiritual gift to make them strong by reminding them of the gospel (1:11; 15:14-15). To do that, he thoroughly expounded the gospel truth in 1:18-8:39. Second, he tried to help Jews and Gentiles accept and respect each other so they could be united in carrying out God's plan of world redemption (9:1-11:36; 14:1-15:13). Third, he wanted the support of the Roman believers for his world mission ministry. He asked that when he visited Rome on the way to Spain, they would support him on his journey (15:23-24). He also asked them to join him in his struggle by praying for him: to be kept safe from unbelievers in Judea and that the offering from the Gentile churches may be favorably received in Jerusalem (15:30-31).

## Main Theme

The main theme of this letter is that in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed. This theme flows throughout the whole letter. According to God's righteous judgment, the whole world is under his wrath. The Gentiles refused to recognize God as God and became idol worshipers and morally degenerate (1:18-32). On the other hand, the Jews who had the law of God tried to obtain God's righteousness by their own effort to keep the law. But they failed (2:1-3:8). No one can be righteous (3:9-20). But in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed. This righteousness comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe, both Jews and Gentiles. It is given freely by God's grace (3:21-31). This is the gospel of God, which he promised in advance—as the Scriptures testify—and fulfilled through Jesus Christ (1:2-4). Through the gospel, God demonstrated his righteousness: that he is just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus (3:26). In this way, God demonstrated his love for us (5:8). We can enjoy peace with God, free from the condemnation of the law (5:1-7:25). God's righteousness is much more than legal justification. Rather, God adopts those who believe in him as his children. Now we can come to God freely by calling him "**Abba, Father.**" This is possible through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us and guarantees that we are God's children and his heirs (8:1-17). God's righteousness extends beyond the salvation of human beings—it is revealed in the restoration of all creation (8:18-39). Even though God's chosen people failed, God did not fail.

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God's righteousness is revealed through his mercy on disobedient people. As God had mercy on the Gentiles who were disobedient, so he will have mercy on his chosen people, Israel (9:1-11:36). God's righteousness is to be lived out practically in community and society for his glory (12:1-15:13).

## Characteristics

**Systematic comprehensive Christian doctrine.** While other epistles deal with specific doctrinal issues related to their context, Romans offers a more comprehensive doctrine systematically. Paul explains the problem of human beings' slavery to sin with no way out. He uses the word "sin" 60 times<sup>2</sup> and "flesh" (sinful nature) 23 times<sup>3</sup> in this letter. He also explains the problem of condemnation of the law both generally and through his own struggle. He uses the word "law" 81 times.<sup>4</sup> He concluded that no one is righteous and the whole world is accountable to God. He expounded how God provided the way of salvation through Jesus Christ by using the words "gospel" 12 times,<sup>5</sup> "grace" 21 times,<sup>6</sup> "righteous(ness)" 41 times,<sup>7</sup> "justify(ied)" 18 times.<sup>8</sup> He taught how to be sanctified by being united with Christ and living in the Spirit. "Holy Spirit" or "Spirit of Christ" or similar expressions appear 29 times throughout this letter and most often in chapter 8 (21 times).<sup>9</sup>

**Jews and Gentiles.** The phrase "first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" appears only in the book of Romans (3 times: 1:16; 2:9,10). This describes God's way of working according to his sovereignty. Paul develops the understanding of God's sovereignty in chapters 9-11, as he deals with the issue of Israel's disobedience. The word "Israel" is repeated 12 times only in chapters 9-11.<sup>10</sup> The word "Gentile" appears 27 times in this letter (NIV).<sup>11</sup>

**Personal greetings.** In many of his epistles, Paul greets a few people by name. But in Romans he greets 28 specific people by name, nine of whom are women. He

<sup>2</sup> 2:12[2]; 3:7,9,20,23,25; 4:7,8; 5:8,12[3],13[2],14,16,19,20,21; 6:1,2,6[2],7,10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18,20,22,23; 7:5,7[2],8[2],9,11,13[4],14,17, 20,23,25; 8:2,3[3],10; 11:27; 14:23.

<sup>3</sup> 1:3; 4:1; 7:5,14,18,25; 8:3[3],4,5[2],6,7,8,9, 12[2],13; 9:3,5,8; 13:14.

<sup>4</sup> 2:12[4],13[2],14[4], 15,17,18,20,23[2],25[2],26,27[2]; 3:19[2],20[2],21[2],27[3], 28,31[2]; 4:7,13,14, 15[2],16; 5:13[2],20; 6:14,15,19[2]; 7:1[2],2[2],3,4,5,6,7[3], 8,9,12,14,16,21,22, 23[3],25[2]; 8:2[2],3,4,7; 9:4,31[2]; 10:4,5; 13:8,10.

<sup>5</sup> 1:1,2,9,15,16,17; 2:16; 11:28; 15:16,19,20; 16:25.

<sup>6</sup> 1:5,7; 3:24; 4:16; 5:2,15[2],17,20,21; 6:1,14,15; 11:5,6[3]; 12:3,6; 15:15; 16:20.

<sup>7</sup> 1:17[2],32; 2:5,13; 3:5,10,21,22,25,26; 4:3,5,6,9,11[2],13,22; 5:7,17,18,19,21; 6:13,16,18, 19,20; 7:12; 8:4,10; 9:30[2],31; 10:3[2],4,5,6; 14:17.

<sup>8</sup> 2:13; 3:4,20,24,26,28,30; 4:2,5,25; 5:1,9,16,18; 8:30[2],33; 10:10.

<sup>9</sup> 1:4; 2:29; 5:5; 7:6; 8:2,4,5[2],6,9[3],10,11[2],13,14,15[2],16,23,26[2],27[2]; 9:1; 14:17; 15:13,16.

<sup>10</sup> 9:4,6[2],27,31; 10:19,21; 11:2,7,11,25,26.

<sup>11</sup> 1:5,6,13,16; 2:9,10,14,24; 3:9,22,29[2]; 9:24,30; 10:12; 11:11,12,13[2],25; 15:9,10,11,12,16[2],18,27; 16:4,26.

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also mentions churches and households and brothers and sisters. He greeted them **“in the Lord”** and commended those who worked hard. He also included words of personal affection for some of them, using the words **“my dear friend”** (5,8,9,12), and **“fellow Jew”** or **“relative”** (7,11), and **“who has been a mother to me”** (13).

## The Significance of Romans

Romans is the first epistle in the canon of the New Testament. While the Gospels, together with the book of Acts, constitute the narrative facts of the gospel message, Romans explains its meaning most comprehensively. Romans has had a great impact on prominent leaders throughout Christian history—Augustine, Martin Luther, John Wesley, Karl Barth, and more. Romans has inspired countless people to truly understand the gospel and live by it.

Augustine (A.D. 354-430) was having a burning struggle within himself between his holy desire and sinful nature. He cried, “How long, how long? tomorrow and tomorrow? Why not now? Why not this very hour make an end to my uncleanness?”<sup>12</sup> In his desperation, he heard the voice of a child singing a song, “pick up and read, pick up and read.”<sup>13</sup> He accepted this as divine guidance to open the Bible and read it. The passage he opened to, Romans 13:13-14, came to his heart with conviction: **“Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.”** These words empowered him to break away from his old life and live a new life. The book of Romans, especially with its emphasis on grace, became the foundation for Augustine’s teaching and practice as a shepherd for the church of God in his time. His influence has extended down through the generations.

Martin Luther (A.D. 1483-1546), like everyone else in Medieval Christendom, had been brought up in the fear of God who judges, condemns and sends to hell. At the age of 21, he became a monk. He tried to meet the God of grace through works of prayer, fasting, penance and other extreme practices. Yet nothing could assuage the torment of his soul. But when he struggled with the book of Romans he experienced God’s grace. He wrote: “I had greatly longed to understand Paul’s letter to the Romans, and nothing stood in the way but that one

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<sup>12</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 8.28.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.29.

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expression, ‘the righteousness of God,’ because I took it to mean that righteousness whereby God is righteous and acts righteously in punishing the unrighteous... Night and day I pondered it until... I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby, through grace and sheer mercy, he justifies us by faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before ‘the righteousness of God’ had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gateway into heaven.”<sup>14</sup> Through his experience, Luther could understand the deep meaning of the righteousness of God in the gospel. This enabled him to bring the church back to gospel faith. He said in his preface to his commentary on Romans, “This Epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament and the very purest Gospel, and it is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul. It can never be read or pondered too much, and the more it is dealt with the more precious it becomes, and the better it tastes.”<sup>15</sup>

John Wesley (A.D. 1703-1791), an ordained Anglican pastor, joined a “Holy Club” founded by his brother Charles while at Oxford, England. He did his best to study the Bible, examine his life accordingly, and to do good works. But he did not have a personal experience of God’s grace. Nevertheless, he went as a missionary to the American colony of Georgia, where he served for two years and retreated in discouragement. On his journey back to England, he met a storm at sea and was terrified. But some Moravian Christians on board were singing praises to God without fear. Wesley was convicted of his lack of faith. Upon arrival, he joined a Moravian Christian meeting. As someone was reading Luther’s Preface to Romans, Wesley experienced God’s grace. In his words, “About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”<sup>16</sup> After this, Wesley began to proclaim the grace of Christ in the gospel and was used as a catalyst in the revival movement of the 18th century.

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<sup>14</sup> From the preface to the Wittenberg edition of his Latin works (1545); cf. *Luther’s Works*, American edition, 34 (1960), 336f.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, translated by J. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), Xiii.

<sup>16</sup> *John Wesley’s Journal* from the entry for 24 May 1738.

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## Purpose of Our Study

- To come to know the profound meaning of the gospel so that we may have the assurance of salvation, victory over the sinful nature, and grow in the likeness of Christ for the glory of God.
- To be equipped and empowered to eagerly preach the gospel for the glory of God.

## Outline

- I. God's righteousness revealed in the gospel (1:1-17)
  - A. Greetings and the gospel (1-7)
  - B. Paul's prayer and vision to visit Rome (8-15)
  - C. The power of the gospel; the righteous will live by faith (16-17)
  
- II. God's righteous judgment upon the whole world (1:18-3:20)
  - A. Those who live without God are under his wrath (1:18-32)
  - B. God's righteousness against those who judge others (2:1-16)
  - C. God's righteous judgment against the Jews (2:17-3:8)
  - D. No one is righteous, not even one (9-20)
  
- III. God's righteousness through faith in Jesus (3:21-4:25)
  - A. Justified freely by faith in Jesus, the atoning sacrifice (3:21-26)
  - B. God is the God of Jews and Gentiles (27-31)
  - C. Abraham and David's examples of faith (4:1-25)
  
- IV. The blessings of righteousness by faith (5:1-8:39)
  - A. Consequences of justification (5:1-21)
    1. Peace with God and hope (1-11)
    2. Sin, death through Adam; grace, life through Christ (12-21)
  - B. Live a new life (6:1-23)
    1. Count yourselves dead to sin and alive in Christ (1-14)
    2. Offer yourselves to righteousness (15-23)
  - C. Free from the law (7:1-25)
    1. Release from the law and united with Christ (1-6)
    2. The function of the law and rescue from sin (7-25)
  - D. The glory of God's children (8:1-39)
    1. No condemnation in Christ Jesus (1-4)

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2. Life by the Spirit (5-13)
3. Children of God, co-heirs with Christ (14-17)
4. Present sufferings and future glory (18-30)
5. Nothing can separate us from the love of God (31-39)

## V. God's righteousness: sovereign mercy on Israel and the Gentiles (9:1-11:36)

### A. God's sovereign choice (9:1-29)

1. Paul's broken heart for Israel, the chosen people (1-5)
2. God's sovereign choice, based not on works but on mercy (6-29)

### B. Righteousness by faith, not by works (9:30-10:21)

1. Israel's failure due to their ignorance of Christ (9:30-10:4)
2. Righteousness comes by faith not by obedience to the law (5-13)
3. The gospel was preached but Israel did not accept (14-21)

### C. God's plan for Israel (11:1-36)

1. A remnant chosen by grace (1-10)
2. Gentiles, ingrafted by grace, should not be arrogant (11-24)
3. The mystery: all Israel will be saved (25-32)
4. Doxology: from him, through him, for him are all things (33-36)

## VI. God's righteousness in practical life (12:1-15:13)

### A. Living sacrifice (12:1-13:14)

1. Offer your bodies as living sacrifices (12:1-2)
2. One body, many members, different functions and gifts (3-8)
3. Practical admonitions for Christian living (9-21)
4. Be subject to the governing authorities (13:1-7)
5. Love fulfills the law (8-10)
6. Put on the armor of light (11-14)

### B. Accept one another, act in love (14:1-15:13)

1. Accept the weak in faith without passing judgment (14:1-13)
2. Do what leads to peace and mutual edification (14-23)
3. Accept one another to bring praise to God (15:1-13)

## VII. Paul's vision and final greetings (15:14-16:27)

### A. Paul's vision to visit Rome on the way to Spain (15:14-33)

### B. Paul's personal greetings to the believers in Rome (16:1-16)

### C. Paul's warning to those who cause divisions (17-20)

### D. Greetings from Paul's coworkers to the believers in Rome (21-24)

### E. Concluding doxology about the gospel (25-27)

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