

Romans 1:1-17 | INTRODUCTION TO ROMANS

Synopsis

The letter to the Romans. It might be the most daunting book in the whole Bible. Men greater and smarter than any of us have spent their lives studying it and still not plumbed the depths of what is being said. It's Paul's longest letter and almost certainly his most controversial. The best Bible scholars in the world read it and come to much different conclusions. It's full of heady and deep and rich theology, and it's quite frankly easy to get lost. Because of its complexity, some have decided to ignore Romans altogether.

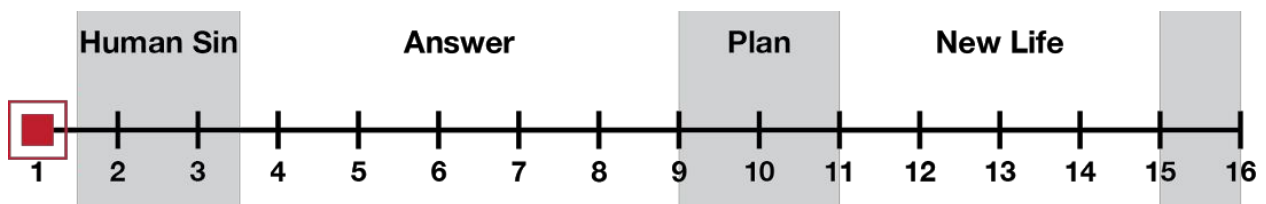
However, despite its sophistication, Romans presents an amazingly beautiful and simple message: the gospel is for everyone. While the letter might have a lot to say about a lot of different issues, it also tells the simple story of God's salvation plan for the world. Romans is all about the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ.

This first week will be different than all the others, as we are trying to get a handle on Romans, the entire letter, not just a passage or two. We understand this letter can be intimidating. But just trust us. Where there is complexity, with the help of the Spirit, Scripture can become extraordinarily simple. We hope that while studying Romans, your life with Christ will be seen within the larger framework of God's salvation story.

The **reading** is Romans 1:1-17. The **focus passage** is Romans 1:16-17.

The win this week: Understand the "outline" of Romans, giving the students a roadmap of the semester. Discuss the importance of the letter's opening.

The Roadmap



It's easy to forget that when we're reading Romans, we're reading a letter meant to be read in its entirety. Taking sections out of context will only lead to a bad interpretation. This week will be the roadmap for the rest of our semester with Romans. Without the map, it's easy to get lost.

The timeline above helps put Romans in a progression. Paul is, after all, making an argument. How would you like it if you were writing a letter to a friend to convince them of something and someone studying it ignored the first half, and didn't read the conclusion. They would probably miss at least *some* of what you're trying to say.

Paul's letter is no different. We're going to follow Paul's argument throughout the semester, but here we'll lay it out as succinctly as possible. This is a broad outline, and certainly not perfect or exhaustive. But it is meant to conceptually help you move through this semester.

We're going to be looking, from a bird's eye view, at the entire letter. Don't let this freak you out. We're following that timeline to highlight some of the major themes in the letter so we don't get lost throughout the semester. Feel free to come back to this as a reference later on. **This will be the focus of this week, but you can also cover part of Paul's introduction in Romans 1:1-17.**

(Note: Of course it's up to you, but it may be helpful to print this upcoming section out and bring it to your group. It's a flyby of Romans to help them think about what Paul is trying to do here.)

Paul begins his letter with a traditional **introduction**. Paul has never been to Rome, but he has heard about the Romans and their faith (Romans 1:8). The community of Christians in Rome was made up of Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews), and Paul will address both throughout the letter. Paul completes his conclusion with his thesis statement in Romans 1:16: the gospel is for all people, both Jew and Gentile. He will proceed to build on this argument.

He then discusses **human sin**, starting in Romans 1:18. His point here is that all human beings are fallen and sinful. Paul uses homosexuality (among other things) as an example: humans have rebelled against God's design in just about every way imaginable. He develops this into a discussion about the *universality of sin* (Romans 3:9-23). Jew or Gentile, everyone is in the same boat. This argument hits the climax at Romans 3:23—"all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

We need not dwell long on sin, however. For Paul makes clear that though sin is an enormous problem, **there is an answer**. Just after 3:23, Paul in Romans 3:24 says: "and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." Paul presents how we are made right with God, sometimes called *justification*. He demonstrates in Romans 4 how Abraham, who lived before the law of Moses, was justified before God through faith. In Romans 5 we see how our faith in Christ brings *salvation*—it saves us from the sin that Paul talked about in chapters 1-3. Because we are saved, we are free to begin living a life with Christ (Romans 6-7). With this salvation comes life and adoption (Romans 8:1-17). We are no longer subject to the desires of our flesh. We can celebrate, then, that Christ is powerful and our salvation is secure (Romans 8:31-39).

Paul then moves to the tension between God's promises to Israel and Israel's rejection of Christ (Romans 9-11). Though there are some controversial things here, Paul's argument is talking about **the plan of general election of God's people**. He will show Christ as the climax of history and look at the future of Israel. Paul is clear that God's call for salvation is for all people, Jew and Gentile, and neither should be excluded from the faith.

Romans 12 is the turn from good theology to good living, a jump that *actual* good theology requires. We learn what this **new life** looks like. The chapter begins with "therefore." He is saying something like: "Therefore, in light of everything I've just said, knowing that all have sinned and, in Christ, all are free, offer your bodies as living sacrifices." There are few places in the Bible that give as clear a picture of what it looks like to live like Jesus as Romans 12. It is summed up in Romans 12:21: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Romans 13-15 is all about **submission**. Submit to the authorities, submit to love, and submit to one another. Life with Christ is not about gaining power for yourself, it's about giving up power. Paul then ends his letter with a **closing** addressing specific people within the church, thanking and greeting the workers that have toiled and worked in Rome and beyond.

That's where we are going. We might even get lost a time or two. But keep to the map and see the larger argument and you will find your way again. The road will be long and at times laborious. But if we devote ourselves honestly and earnestly to the study of this road, few journeys will be more beneficial. With that, we have only to begin.

Read Romans 1:1-17

Commentary

Romans is written by the Apostle Paul to the church in Rome. Though Rome would have been predominately Gentile, there was also a synagogue where a pocket of Jews worshipped, and some were Jewish *Christians*. So the church at Rome included both Jews and Gentiles.

Unlike many of the churches Paul writes letters to, Paul has never visited Rome. So Paul would have been seen as a bit of an outsider to these readers. This is why he must spend a few verses on himself (Romans 1:1-6). Paul is showing the Roman readers his divine mission. He's an apostle to the Gentiles by the will of God. This certainly includes the church in Rome.

In v. 7, Paul tells us about the people he's writing to: They are loved by God, they are called to be saints, and they are recipients of God's grace and peace. While we can't always take what Paul says as *directly* applicable to us, this verse leaves no doubt. As the people of God, we are loved, called, and recipients. In that order. We are called because we are loved, and we act through receiving God's grace and peace.

In v. 8-15, Paul is practicing what he preaches. He wants to visit the church for mutual edification and encouragement. We will see Paul's argument continually return to the point of caring for each other, the body of Christ. He also discusses the importance of church unity and inclusion. He wants to show his readers at the beginning that he is serious about this, and intends to practice it himself.

Verses 16 and 17 are good passages for a Christian to focus on. In the Roman Empire, the culture was focused on one city (Rome) and one man (Caesar). Caesar claimed to rule the world. The gospel says otherwise. Paul is not ashamed of this, and neither should the Roman Christians. As he says, "it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes." Salvation is for *everyone* who believes. It is not for a particular group of people, but all people. This will be Paul's rallying cry moving forward.

Fun fact: It was while lecturing over Romans 1:17 that reformer Martin Luther began to formulate the doctrine of "justification by faith." As he came to see, this is not so much his own doctrine as it is Scripture's. But this verse was very influential in beginning the Protestant Reformation. Don't know what that is? [Click here](#).

🔍 Questions

Why do you think Paul begins his letter with a prayer starting in verse 8?

Paul starts off by talking about his own life in a very personal way... But these people have never met him? Why's he begin the letter this way?

Paul says in v. 14 that he is "under obligation." What does he mean by this?

Verse 17 says that the righteousness of God is revealed "from faith for faith." What in the world does this mean?

Why is Paul so eager to preach the gospel and go to Rome?

🔍 Application Questions

Paul is addressing two different groups here, Jews and Gentiles. There are clearly problems with unity. What groups today find unity difficult and how is that a barrier to the gospel?

What are some things that you've heard about the book of Romans?

Being ashamed of the gospel is a serious issue that is often ignored. But what does this really mean? Does this mean you have to preach the gospel to every person you talk to?

How would you imagine the early Roman community of Christians is similar to our own? How would you imagine it is different?

How would you imagine the early Roman community of *non-Christians* to be similar or different than our own?

Some people have criticized Paul for being boastful. Is this fair? Why is he talking about himself in the first few verses? When might that be important for us to practice?

Paul is breaking down barriers to bring other people into the Kingdom so they too can be a part of the people of God. How is this point important for people *within* the community already?

Accountability

Paul tells the Romans that their faith is heard around the world (v. 8). He even suggests that he longs to visit the Roman Christians so his own faith can be encouraged (v. 12). This community in Rome is clearly one that is greatly respected despite not being founded by anyone important.

- What characteristics would a community like this have? How does your community reflect this?
- How do you individually reflect these characteristics within the larger community?

Resource Toolbox



[Introduction to Romans](#)



[Tim Keller - "The God Who Is"](#)



[John Piper - "The Author of the Greatest Letter Ever Written"](#)