

# A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

If you are tired of all the wrong things in your life, in the lives of others, and in this world, then Paul's epistle to the Romans is the book for you.

The theme of Romans is the righteousness of God. In this letter, Paul tells how to *Be Right*—with God, ourselves, and others. Paul also explains how one day God will make creation right and bring peace on earth.

The epistle to the Romans was not written for woolgatherers or religious sightseers. You will have to *think* as you study this letter, but the rewards will be worth the efforts. If you understand Romans, you will have the key to understanding the rest of the Bible. Better still, you will have the secret to successful Christian living.

*Be Right* is not a detailed explanation of Romans. It is an expository survey that helps you understand the main message of the letter and how it applies to your life today. After you have mastered this book, you can turn to the more detailed commentaries and, I trust, be better prepared to benefit from them.

—Warren W. Wiersbe

## A SUGGESTED OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF ROMANS

Theme: The righteousness of God

Theme verse: Romans 1:17

- I. Introduction (Romans 1:1–17)
- II. Sin—Righteousness Demanded (Romans 1:18—3:20)
  - A. The Gentile world is guilty (Romans 1:18–32)
  - B. The Jewish world is guilty (Romans 2:1—3:8)
  - C. The whole world is guilty (Romans 3:9–20)
- III. Salvation—Righteousness Declared (Romans 3:21—5:21)
  - A. Justification explained (Romans 3:21–31)
  - B. Justification illustrated in Abraham (Romans 4)
  - C. Justification explained in Adam (Romans 5)
- IV. Sanctification—Righteousness Defended (Romans 6—8)
  - A. Victory—the flesh (Romans 6)
  - B. Liberty—the Law (Romans 7)
  - C. Security—the Spirit (Romans 8)
- V. Sovereignty—Righteousness Declined (Romans 9—11)
  - A. Israel’s past riches (Romans 9)
  - B. Israel’s present rejection (Romans 10)
  - C. Israel’s future restoration (Romans 11)
- VI. Service—Righteousness Demonstrated (Romans 12:1—15:7)
  - A. In the church body (Romans 12)
  - B. In society (Romans 13)
  - C. Toward the weaker believer (Romans 14:1—15:7)
- VII. Conclusion (Romans 15:8—16:27)

# READY FOR ROME

(Romans 1:1–17)

**O**n May 24, 1738, a discouraged missionary went “very unwillingly” to a religious meeting in London. There a miracle took place. “About a quarter before nine,” he wrote in his journal, “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.”

That missionary was John Wesley. The message he heard that evening was the preface to Martin Luther’s commentary on Romans. Just a few months before, John Wesley had written in his journal: “I went to America to convert the Indians; but Oh! who shall convert me?” That evening in Aldersgate Street, his question was answered. And the result was the great Wesleyan Revival that swept England and transformed the nation.

Paul’s epistle to the Romans is still transforming people’s lives, just the way it transformed Martin Luther and John Wesley. The one Scripture above all others that brought Luther out of mere religion into the joy of salvation by grace, through faith, was Romans 1:17: “The just shall live by faith.” The Protestant Reformation and the Wesleyan Revival were both the fruit of this wonderful letter written by Paul from

Corinth about the year AD 56. The letter was carried to the Christians at Rome by one of the deaconesses of the church at Cenchrea, Sister Phebe (Rom. 16:1).

Imagine! You and I can read and study the same inspired letter that brought life and power to Luther and Wesley! And the same Holy Spirit who taught them can teach us! You and I can experience revival in our hearts, homes, and churches if the message of this letter grips us as it has gripped people of faith in centuries past.

In the opening verses of the letter, Paul introduces himself to the believers in Rome. Some of them must have known him personally, since he greets them in the final chapter, but many of them he had never met. So in these first seventeen verses, Paul seeks to link himself to his Roman readers in three ways.

### 1. HE PRESENTED HIS CREDENTIALS (1:1–7)

In ancient days, the writer of a letter always opened with his name. But there would be many men named Paul in that day, so the writer had to further identify himself and convince the readers that he had a right to send the letter. What were Paul's credentials?

**He was a servant of Jesus Christ (v. 1a).** The word Paul used for *servant* would be meaningful to the Romans, because it is the word *slave*. There were an estimated sixty million slaves in the Roman Empire, and a slave was looked on as a piece of property, not a person. In loving devotion, Paul had enslaved himself to Christ, to be His servant and obey His will.

**He was an apostle (v. 1b).** This word means “one who is sent by authority with a commission.” It was applied in that day to the representatives of the emperor or the emissaries of a king. One of the requirements for an apostle was the experience of seeing the risen Christ (1 Cor. 9:1–2). Paul saw Christ when he was on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–9), and it was

then that Christ called him to be His apostle to the Gentiles. Paul received from Christ divine revelations that he was to share with the churches.

**He was a preacher of the gospel (vv. 1c–4).** When he was a Jewish rabbi, Paul was separated as a Pharisee to the laws and traditions of the Jews. But when he yielded to Christ, he was separated to the gospel and its ministry. *Gospel* means “the good news.” It is the message that Christ died for our sins, was buried and rose again, and now is able to save all who trust Him (1 Cor. 15:1–4). It is “the gospel of God” (Rom. 1:1) because it originates with God; it was not invented by humans. It is “the gospel of Christ” (Rom. 1:16) because it centers in Christ, the Savior. Paul also calls it “the gospel of his Son” (Rom. 1:9), which indicates that *Jesus Christ is God*. In Romans 16:25–26, Paul called it “my gospel.” By this he meant the special emphasis he gave in his ministry to the doctrine of the church and the place of the Gentiles in the plan of God.

The gospel is not a new message; it was promised in the Old Testament, beginning in Genesis 3:15. The prophet Isaiah certainly preached the gospel in passages such as Isaiah 1:18 and chapters 53 and 55. The salvation we enjoy today was promised by the prophets, though they did not fully understand all that they were preaching and writing (1 Peter 1:10–12).

Jesus Christ is the center of the gospel message. Paul identified Him as a man, a Jew, and the Son of God. He was born of a virgin (Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:18–25) into the family of David, which gave Him the right to David’s throne. He died for the sins of the world and then was raised from the dead. It is this miraculous event of substitutionary death and victorious resurrection that constitutes the gospel, and it was this gospel that Paul preached.

**He was a missionary to the Gentiles (vv. 5–7).** *Missionary* is the Latin form of “apostle—one who is sent.” There were probably several assemblies of believers in Rome and not just one church, since in Romans 16 Paul

greeted a number of “home church” groups (Rom. 16:5, 10–11, 14). We do not know for certain how these churches began, but it is likely that believers from Rome who were at Pentecost established the assemblies on their return to Rome (Acts 2:10). There were both Jews and Gentiles in these fellowships, because Paul addresses both in this letter. (Jews: Rom. 2:17–29; 4:1; 7:1. Gentiles: Rom. 1:13; 11:13–24; 15:15–21.) The churches in Rome were not founded by Peter or any other apostle. If they had been, Paul would not have planned to visit Rome, because his policy was to minister only where no other apostle had gone (Rom. 15:20–21).

Note the repetition of the word *called*: Paul was called to be an apostle; the believers were the called of Jesus Christ; and they were also called saints. (Not “to be” saints; they already were saints! A saint is a set-apart one, and the person who trusts Jesus Christ is set apart and is a saint.) Salvation is not something that we do for God; it is God who calls us in His grace (2 Thess. 2:13–14). When you trust Christ, you are saved by His grace and you experience His peace.

Paul’s special commission was to take the gospel to the Gentiles (the word *nations* means Gentiles), and this is why he was planning to go to Rome, the very capital of the empire. He was a preacher of the gospel, and the gospel was for all nations. In fact, Paul was anxious to go to Spain with the message of Christ (Rom. 15:28).

Having presented his credentials, Paul proceeded to forge a second link between himself and the believers in Rome.

## 2. HE EXPRESSED HIS CONCERN (1:8–15)

We can well understand Paul’s concern for the churches that *he* founded, but why would he be concerned about the believers at Rome? He was unknown to many of them, yet he wanted to assure them that he was deeply concerned about their welfare. Note the evidences of Paul’s concern.

**He was thankful for them (v. 8).** “The whole world”—meaning the whole Roman Empire—knew of the faith of the Christians at Rome. Travel was relatively common in that day and “all roads led to Rome.” It is no wonder that the testimony of the church spread abroad, and this growing witness made Paul’s ministry easier as he went from place to place and was able to point to this testimony going out from the heart of the Roman Empire.

**He prayed for them (vv. 9–10).** They did not know of Paul’s prayer support, but the Lord knew about it and honored it. (I wonder how many of us know the people who are praying for us?) One of the burdens of Paul’s prayer was that God would permit him to visit Rome and minister to the churches there. He would have visited them sooner, but his missionary work had kept him busy (Rom. 15:15–33). He was about to leave Corinth for Jerusalem to deliver the special offering received from the Gentile churches for the poor Jewish saints. He hoped he would be able to travel from Jerusalem to Rome, and then on to Spain, and he was hoping for a prosperous journey.

Actually, Paul had a very perilous journey, and he arrived in Rome a prisoner as well as a preacher. In Jerusalem he was arrested in the temple, falsely accused by the Jewish authorities, and eventually sent to Rome as the emperor’s prisoner to be tried before Caesar. When Paul wrote this letter, he had no idea that he would go through imprisonment and even shipwreck before arriving in Rome. At the close of the letter (Rom. 15:30–33), he asked the believers in Rome to pray for him as he contemplated this trip, and it is a good thing that they did pray.

**He loved them (vv. 11–12).** “I long to see you.” This is the pastor’s heart in Paul the great missionary. Some of the saints in Rome were very dear to Paul, such as Priscilla and Aquila (Rom. 16:3–4), who risked their lives for him, “the beloved Persis” (Rom. 16:12), and others who had

labored and suffered with Paul. But he also loved the believers that he did not know, and he longed to be able to share some spiritual gift with them. He was looking forward to a time of mutual blessing in the love of Christ.

**He was in debt to them (vv. 13–14).** As the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul had an obligation to minister in Rome. He would have fulfilled that obligation sooner, but his other labors had hindered him. Sometimes Paul was hindered because of the work of Satan (1 Thess. 2:17–20), but in this case he was hindered because of the work of the Lord. There was so much to do in Asia Minor and Greece that he could not immediately spare time for Rome. But Paul had to pay his debt; he was under orders from the Lord.

The Greeks considered every non-Greek a barbarian. Steeped in centuries of philosophy, the Greeks saw themselves as wise and everyone else as foolish. But Paul felt an obligation to *all* men, just as we need to feel a burden for the whole world. Paul could not be free from his debt until he had told as many people as possible the good news of salvation in Christ.

**He was eager to visit them (v. 15).** Two different Greek words are translated “ready” in the King James Version. One means “prepared,” as in Acts 21:13. “I am ready ... to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.” The other one, used in Romans 1:15, means “eager, with a ready mind.” Paul was not eager to die, though he was prepared to die. But he was eager to visit Rome that he might minister to the believers there. It was not the eagerness of a sightseer, but the eagerness of a soul winner.

After reading these five evidences of Paul’s concern for the Christians at Rome, these saints could not but give thanks to God for the apostle Paul and his burden to come and minister to them. Actually, the epistle to the Romans, in which Paul explained the gospel he preached, was his letter of introduction that prepared the believers for his visit. No doubt

the false teachers had already gotten to Rome and were seeking to poison the Christians against Paul. Some would accuse him of being antilaw; others would say he was a traitor to the Jewish nation. Still others would twist his teaching about grace and try to prove that he taught loose living (see Rom. 3:8). No wonder Paul was eager to get to Rome! He wanted to share with them the fullness of the gospel of Christ.

But would the gospel of Christ work in the great city of Rome as it had in other places? Would Paul succeed there, or would he fail? The apostle no doubt felt these objections and raised these questions in his own mind, which is why he forged a third link between himself and his readers.

### **3. HE AFFIRMED HIS CONFIDENCE (1:16–17)**

What a testimony: “I am a debtor! I am eager! I am not ashamed!” Why would Paul even be tempted to be ashamed of the gospel as he contemplated his trip to Rome? For one thing, the gospel was identified with a poor Jewish carpenter who was crucified. The Romans had no special appreciation for the Jews, and crucifixion was the lowest form of execution given a criminal. Why put your faith in a Jew who was crucified?

Rome was a proud city, and the gospel came from Jerusalem, the capital city of one of the little nations that Rome had conquered. The Christians in that day were not among the elite of society; they were common people and even slaves. Rome had known many great philosophers and philosophies; why pay any attention to a fable about a Jew who arose from the dead (1 Cor. 1:18–25)? Christians looked on each other as brothers and sisters, all one in Christ, which went against the grain of Roman pride and dignity. To think of a little Jewish tentmaker going to Rome to preach such a message is almost humorous.

But Paul was not ashamed of the gospel. He had confidence in his message, and he gave us several reasons that explain why he was not ashamed.

**The origin of the gospel: It is the gospel of Christ (v. 16a).** Any message that was handed down from Caesar would immediately get the attention of the Romans. But the message of the gospel is from and about the very Son of God! In his opening sentence, Paul called this message “the gospel of God” (Rom. 1:1). How could Paul be ashamed of such a message, when it came from God and centered in His Son, Jesus Christ?

During my years in high school, I was chosen to be an office monitor. The other hall monitors sat at various stations around the building, but I was privileged to sit right outside the door of the main high school office. I was entrusted with important messages that I had to deliver to different teachers and staff members, and on occasion even to other schools. Believe me, it was fun to walk into a classroom and even interrupt a lesson. No teacher ever scolded me, because all of them knew I carried messages from the principal. I never had to be afraid or ashamed, because I knew where my messages came from.

**The operation of the gospel: It is the power of God (v. 16b).** Why be ashamed of power? Power is the one thing that Rome boasted of the most. Greece might have its philosophy, but Rome had its power. The fear of Rome hovered over the empire like a cloud. Were they not the conquerors? Were not the Roman legions stationed all over the known world? But with all of her military power, Rome was still a weak nation. The philosopher Seneca called the city of Rome “a cesspool of iniquity”; and the writer Juvenal called it a “filthy sewer into which the dregs of the empire flood.”

No wonder Paul was not ashamed: He was taking to sinful Rome the one message that had the power to change people’s lives! He had seen the gospel work in other wicked cities, such as Corinth and Ephesus, and he was confident that it would work in Rome. It had transformed his own life, and

he knew it could transform the lives of others. There was a third reason why Paul was not ashamed.

**The outcome of the gospel: It is the power of God unto salvation (v. 16c).** That word *salvation* carried tremendous meaning in Paul's day. Its basic meaning is "deliverance," and it was applied to personal and national deliverance. The emperor was looked on as a savior, as was the physician who healed you of illness. The gospel delivers sinners from the penalty and power of sin. Salvation is a major theme in this letter; salvation is the great need of the human race (see Rom. 10:1, 9–10). If men and women are to be saved, it must be through faith in Jesus Christ as proclaimed in the gospel.

**The outreach of the gospel: "to everyone that believeth" (vv. 16d–17).** This was not an exclusive message for either the Jew or the Gentile; it was for all people, *because everyone needs to be saved*. "Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel," was Christ's commission (Mark 16:15). "To the Jew first" does not suggest that the Jew is better than the Gentile, for there is "no difference" in condemnation or in salvation (Rom. 2:6–11; 10:9–13). The gospel came "to the Jew first" in the ministry of Jesus Christ (Matt. 10:5–7) and the apostles (Acts 3:24–26). How marvelous it is to have a message of power that can be taken to *all* people!

God does not ask people to *behave* in order to be saved, but to *believe*. It is faith in Christ that saves the sinner. Eternal life in Christ is one gift that is suitable for all people, no matter what their need may be or what their station in life.

Romans 1:17 is the key verse of the letter. In it Paul announces the theme: "the righteousness of God." The word *righteousness* is used in one way or another over sixty times in this letter (*righteous, just, and justified*). God's righteousness is revealed in the gospel; for in the death of Christ, God revealed His righteousness by punishing sin; and in the resurrection of

Christ, He revealed His righteousness by making salvation available to the believing sinner. The problem “How can a holy God ever forgive sinners and still be holy?” is answered in the gospel. Through the death and resurrection of Christ, God is seen to be both “just, and the justifier” (Rom. 3:26).

The gospel reveals a righteousness that is *by faith*. In the Old Testament, righteousness was *by works*, but sinners soon discovered they could not obey God’s law and meet His righteous demands. Here Paul refers to Habakkuk 2:4: “The just shall live by his faith.” This verse is quoted three times in the New Testament: Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; and Hebrews 10:38. Romans explains “the just”; Galatians explains “shall live”; and Hebrews explains “by faith.” There are more than sixty references to faith or unbelief in Romans, because the only way a sinner can become just before God is “by faith.”

When you study Romans, you walk into a courtroom. First, Paul called Jews and Gentiles to the stand and found both guilty before God. Then he explained God’s marvelous way of salvation—justification by faith. At this point, he answered his accusers and defended God’s salvation. “This plan of salvation will encourage people to sin!” they cry. “It is against the very law of God!” But Paul refuted them, and in so doing explained how the Christian can experience victory, liberty, and security.

Chapters 9—11 are not a parenthesis or a detour. There were Jewish believers in the Roman assemblies, and they would naturally ask, “What about Israel? How does God’s righteousness relate to the Jews in this new age of the church?” In these three chapters, Paul gave a complete history of Israel—past, present, and future.

Then he concluded with the practical outworking of God’s righteousness in the life of the believer. This begins with dedication to God (Rom. 12:1–2), continues with ministry in the church (Rom. 12:3–21), and then

obedience to the government (Rom. 13:1–14). He also told Jews and Gentiles, strong and weak, how to live together in harmony and joy. In the closing section (Rom. 15:14—16:27), Paul explained his plans and greeted his friends.

When you sum it all up, the book of Romans is saying to us, “*Be right!*” Be right with God, with yourself, and with others. The righteousness of God received by faith makes it possible for us to live right lives. Rome needed this message, and we need it today: *Be right!*

## QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What was the background of the people and the church at Rome?
2. Where did the letter to the Romans come from?
3. What is the main theme and purpose of this book?
4. How is the title *Be Right* related to the verse “The just shall live by faith”?
5. What were Paul’s credentials? If you were writing a letter to a church, how would you introduce yourself?
6. What are some evidences in Romans 1:8–15 that Paul was concerned for the believers?
7. What evidences do you display that you are concerned for others?

8. What were some obstacles to faith for Romans living at that time? How did Paul encourage them?
  
9. How did Paul show that he was not ashamed of the gospel? What do you think about this?
  
10. In what way is the gospel “the power of God”? How does this affect how you live out your faith in your daily life?